OSPREY COMBAT AIRCRAFT • 21

# B-24 LIBERATOR UNITS OF THE FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE

Robert F Dorr

Iain Wyllie

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OSPREY
AVIATION

**Front Cover**

**Medal of Honor winner Col Leon Johnson, strapped into the co-pilot's seat of B-24D 41-23817 *SUZY Q*, leads the 44th Bomb Group's 67th Bomb Squadron into the inferno of the Ploesti oilfields, in Romania, on 1 August 1943. The squadron's target was codenamed *White V*, and it had been hit 20 minutes earlier by Liberators from the 93rd BG. Nine of the 16 aircraft sortied by the 67th BS against *White V* were lost, the Liberators spending 27 minutes over the target area, and a further seven hours flying back to their bases in North Africa. During the marathon return leg of this epic mission, codenamed *Tidal Wave*, crews had to contend with determined fighter attacks from both Luftwaffe and Romanian fighters.**

**In the final analysis, of the 164 B-24s which participated in the raid, 53 were lost – eight were interned in Turkey and 45 shot down en route to and from the target. A further 23 Liberators carried out emergency landings in Cyprus, Sicily or Malta, and of the 88 which succeeded in making it back across the Mediterranean to Benghazi, 55 were suffering from major battle damage. Allied Intelligence subsequently assessed that target *White V* would be inoperable for six months. The massive Ploesti refinery complex was eventually put out of action on a permanent basis following a series of devastating raids flown in May, June and July 1944.**

**Returning to *SUZY Q*, this aircraft was one of the first Liberators to see action with the Eighth Air Force in the ETO in November 1942. Sent to North Africa with the rest of the 44th BG (nicknamed the 'Flying Eightballs') in late January 1943, *SUZY Q* survived in the frontline until 16 August 1943 when, as the last original aircraft of the 67th BS, it was shot down over the Italian coast whilst attempting to bomb Foggia. None of its crew survived (*cover artwork and caption by Iain Wyllie*)**

**Back cover**

**All bomb groups within the 304th Air Division wore a black diamond atop the outer fin, this Douglas-assembled B-24H-15-DT (41-28914) appearing to belong to the 455th BG (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the memory of 2Lt Richard Olson, co-pilot of the B-24H-15-FO 42-94741 *VIVACIOUS LADY* of the 484th Bomb Group, Fifteenth Air Force

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# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION 6**

**PROLOGUE 32**

CHAPTER ONE

**1943 36**

CHAPTER TWO

**1944 47**

CHAPTER THREE

**1945 76**

**APPENDICES 87**

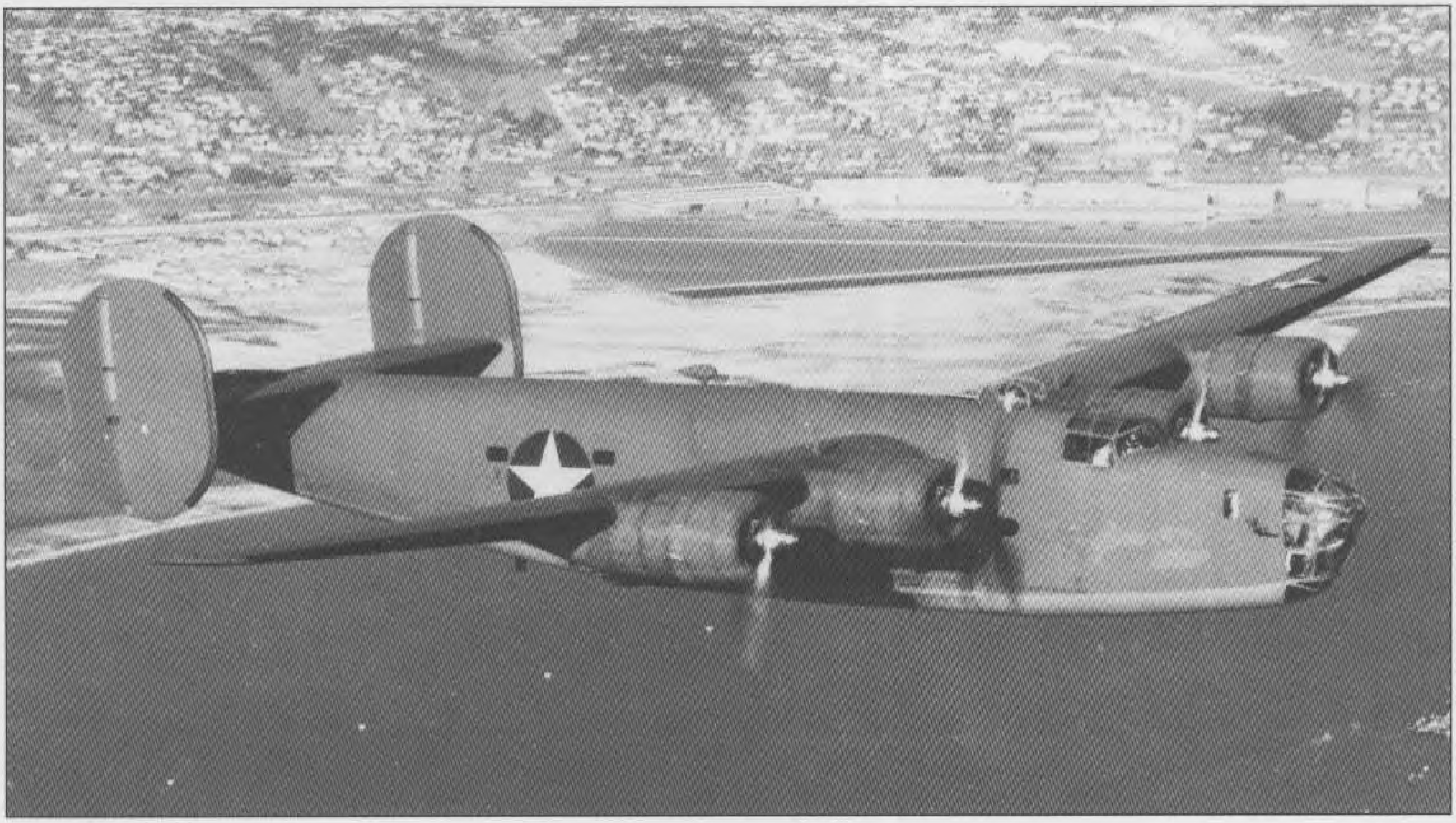
COLOUR PLATES COMMENTARY 90

# INTRODUCTION – THE LIBERATOR AND THE MTO

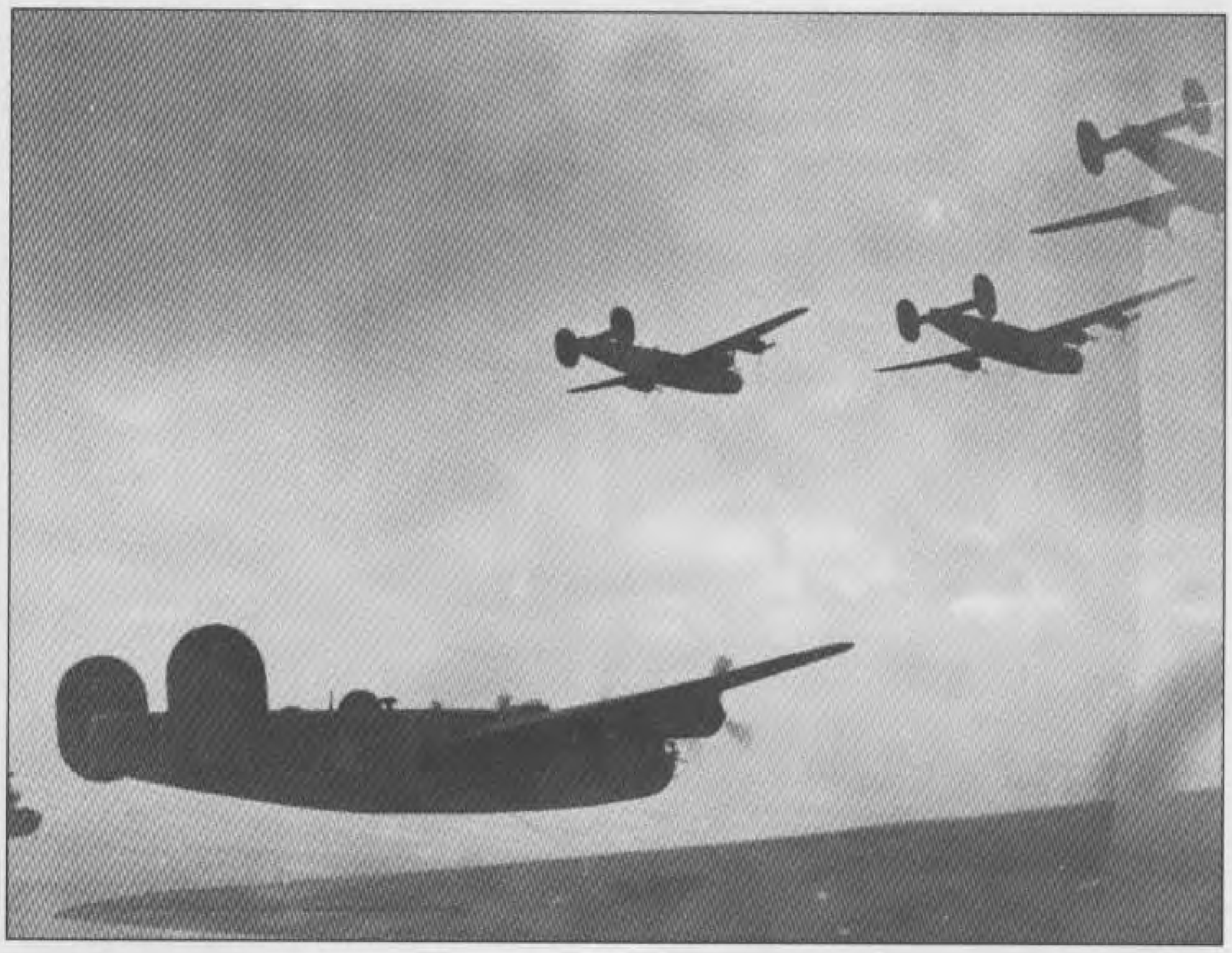
To put the Liberator and its Mediterranean mission into context, the Liberator lore on the next few pages comes from men who were there. The words are not arranged by date and do not describe particular combat missions. Nor will the reader find here the statistics – wing span, gross weight and cruising speed – found in any directory of World War 2 bombers.

With this introductory material, the goal is an elusive one, like a mirage in the desert always receding as we step closer. The goal is nothing less than to give the reader a sense for what it was like to fly the B-24 Liberator. That is a very different thing than describing the Liberator as we know it today, decades removed from the event.

Those directories, with their engine horsepower and other fancy statistics, often overlook the reality of the Liberator. How did you climb into it? Where did the navigator work? What did crews worry about most and least? And, ultimately, what about the controversy that is never far from the minds of B-24 men – the ever-present competition between the B-24 and that other more famous American bomber?



**The earliest Liberators flown by the Fifteenth Air Force and its predecessors in North Africa and Italy were B-24D models, built without powered nose turrets. This in-flight portrait, taken a full two years before the formation of the Fifteenth Air Force (on 25 October 1941), shows what the B-24D version looked like when it first reached the AAF. In wartime, the clean olive-drab finish quickly became weathered, and the 'plain-jane' appearance of factory-fresh bombers soon gave way to distinctive squadron and group markings (*Consolidated*)**



A formation of 44th BG B-24D Liberators is seen forming up soon after leaving Shipdham, in Norfolk, bound for North Africa in late June 1943 (*via Robert F Dorr*)

Like Ancient Rome, the wartime saga of the B-24 Liberator in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations (MTO) is history today. Only about seven per cent of the people in the world today were alive when it happened. But there was a time when it was all new, and nobody knew what was going to happen next.

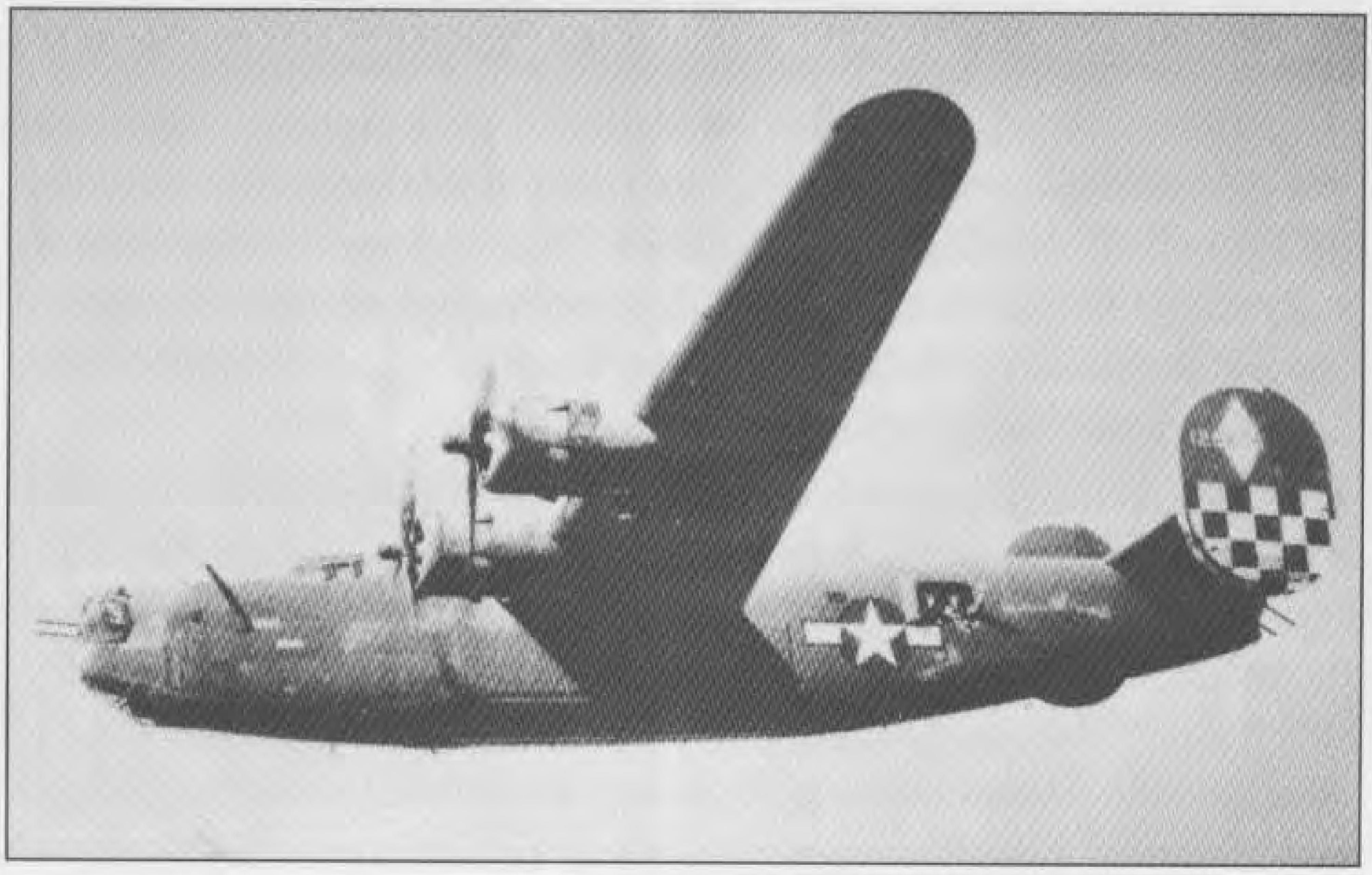
1Lt Lyle McCarty, a navigator with the 459th Bombardment Group (BG) remembered that all of it was fresh, including getting there by ferrying a new bomber across a great ocean. He wrote;

'Imagine four-engined bombers flying off gravel runways in Italy, 20-year-old first pilots with 500 hours total flying experience, Atlantic crossings by navigators who'd never been out of sight of land, combat aircrewmen lacking seat belts or any other forms of safety gear, gunners firing their "fifties" from open waist windows, deadly encounters with flak and enemy fighters, smoke from bombed-out targets rising up to 20,000 ft (6096 m), returning crews bailing out of aircraft too beat up to attempt landing.'

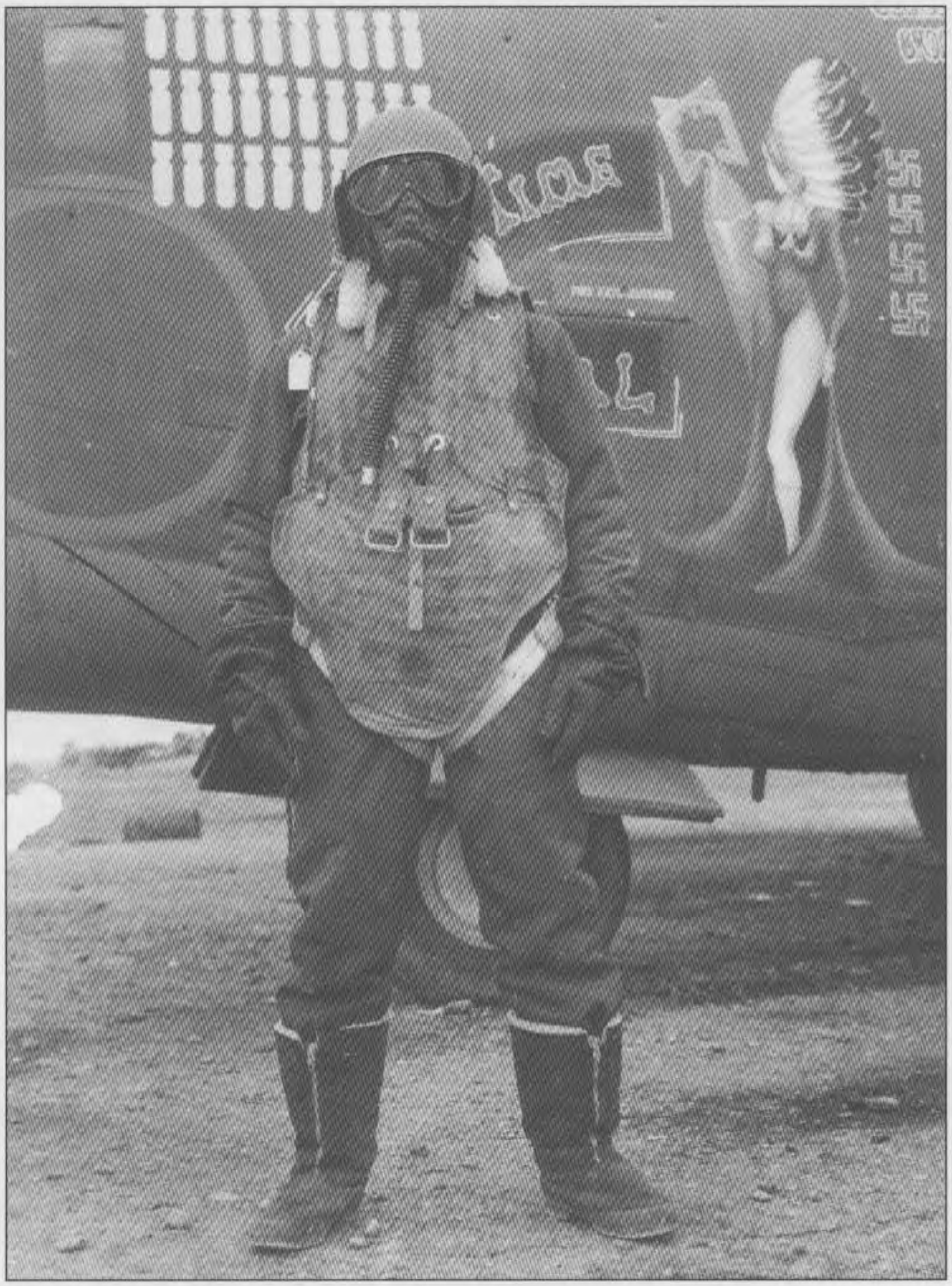
The main body of the text that follows will deal with fighting in this part of the world after the creation of the Fifteenth Air Force on 1 November 1943. But the story begins earlier, when US involvement in the war was new, and the outcome of the conflict uncertain.

## MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE

In June 1942, a specially-trained Liberator outfit equipped with 23 early-build B-24Ds reached the Middle East, commanded by Col Harry A Halverson. The Halpro unit, or Halverson Provisional detachment, was made up of members of the 98th BG, and was heading east with the intention of bombing Japan. After these B-24Ds reached Fayid, in Egypt,



'Flying was different in those days', says Liberator veteran Lyle H McCarty of the 459th BG. This aircraft is a Fort Worth-built B-24H-15-CF Liberator (41-29578) of the 459th BG's 758th BS, seen on a Fifteenth Air Force mission in support of the Combined Bomber Offensive in 1944. Note the waist gunner waving to the photographer, his arm extended into the slipstream. One of his crewmates can also be seen standing to the left of the gunner (*459th BG Association*)



**The war was ugly and unpleasant, but Americans sometimes celebrated the trappings that went with it, including what we know today as 'nose-art' (the term was not used during the war). Many Fifteenth crew members had been teenagers in the late 1930s when Orson Wells' radio broadcast of 'War of the Worlds', adapted from a story by H G Wells, terrified millions of Americans. Now, B-24 Liberator crew members could don their very own 'Man from Mars' attire, as illustrated here. When not being used to ape for the camera, the high-altitude clothing, flak jacket and oxygen mask could be extremely uncomfortable. This anonymous gunner hailed from the San Giovanni-based 455th BG (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

**It was cold at altitude, so on a typical mission deep into Europe, B-24 crews would waddle around inside fleece-lined clothing. There were, in fact, two kinds of high-altitude attire regularly used by heavy bomber crews in the ETO and MTO, this individual being photographed donning non-electrically heated apparel. Heated or non-heated, neither was of much help. Some crew members think of the cold in their reminiscences before they mention the Luftwaffe or the flak (*via David H Klaus*)**

it became apparent that they were needed to combat German forces in the immediate vicinity, so they were kept in theatre.

To Halpro fell the honor of performing the first AAF bombing mission against German forces in Europe. It happened on the night of 11-12 June 1942 when 13 Liberators struck the Romanian oil refineries at Ploesti. It was a symbolic achievement, but it is unclear whether the Liberators' bombs did much damage. Four of the bombers became the first US B-24 casualties in the theatre when they landed near Ankara, in Turkey. Turkish technicians actually repaired and flew one of the bombers (B-24D-CF 41-11596 *BROOKLYN RAMBLER*) before it was eventually repatriated. As for Ploesti, home of German-run oil refineries in the Axis ally of Romania, this target was to become synonymous with the Liberator – but only later.

Halpro flew several more bombing missions before 28 June 1942, when Maj Gen Lewis H Brereton arrived from the Far East with B-17 Flying Fortress-equipped elements of the 7th BG (which had already fought on Java with B-17Es and LB-30s). Brereton formed the USMEAF (US Army Middle East Air Force), which absorbed Halpro. Now dubbed the Hal Bomb Squadron, Halpro bombed the harbour at Benghazi, in Libya, on 20 July 1942.

**Prior to the formation of the Fifteenth Air Force on 1 November 1943, many Liberators in the MTO looked like this aircraft – desert-coloured camouflage. The national insignia seen on this remarkably clean B-24D is the orange-bordered one that was temporarily in use until September 1943. Although the unit and location of this 'plain jane' bomber are not known, this 'Lib' serves as a model for all that came before the olive-drab bombers flown by the Fifteenth (*Norman Taylor via Robert F Dorr*)**

Later that same year the 343rd and the 344th Bombardment Squadrons (BS) started operating as flying components of the 98th BG. A second B-24D-equipped group – the 376th BG 'Liberandos' – was constituted at Lydda, in Palestine, on 19 October 1942. Soon, the 376th was flying from the Egyptian base at Abu Sueir, led by Col Keith K 'K K' Compton. His command eventually included the 512th, 513th, 514th and 515th BSs.

Striking targets in Italy, Sicily and Tunisia between November 1942 and September 1943, the group became a part of the Ninth Air Force, which replaced USMEAF on 12 November 1942 under Brereton. For a few weeks thereafter, Twelfth Air Force was the reporting headquarters.

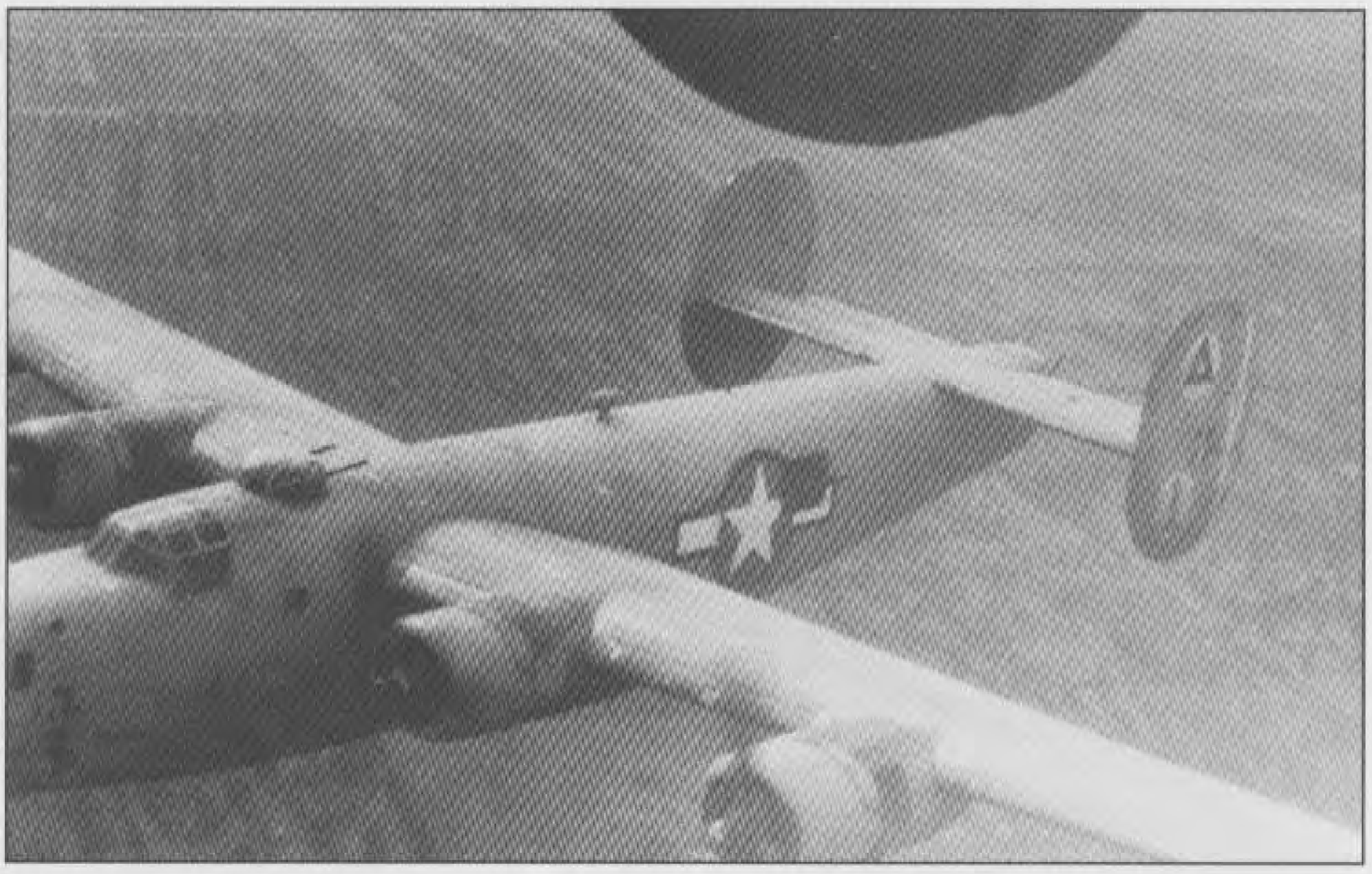
The combat life of the Fifteenth officially began with the 2 November 1943 raid on the Messerschmitt assembly plant at Wiener Neustadt, and continued through to the final wartime attack on the Salzburg main marshalling yard on 1 May 1945. Organised for the purpose of completing the strategic encirclement of Germany and its satellites, the Fifteenth Air Force struck at Axis targets from the south, effectively filling a gap that left every German installation vulnerable to possible air attack.

At the height of its strength, the Fifteenth Air Force controlled 21 heavy bomb groups – 15 with B-24 Liberators and six with B-17 Flying Fortresses. This force totalled 1427 four-engined bombers. The Fifteenth also had four medium bomber groups and, altogether, 1810 bomber crews, including those who flew medium B-25 Mitchells and B-26 Marauders. With seven fighter and two reconnaissance groups capping off its order of battle, the Fifteenth Air Force had 62,180 ground personnel.

The most important prelude to the subsequent formation of the Fifteenth Air Force was the 1 August 1943 low-level mission against Ploesti. The most famous operation ever undertaken by the Liberator bomber is the subject of the brief prologue that follows this introduction. In common with the statistics about the bomber itself, Ploesti is a subject that will consume many books and occupy busy minds for generations. Our purpose, here, is to introduce the bomber first, cover Ploesti briefly, then move ahead to the Fifteenth Air Force.

## SUITABLE BOMBER

The AAF considered the B-24 Liberator the only heavy bomber suitable for the Ploesti mission. That was mostly because it was championed by



**When the Fifteenth Air Force (and its 47th Bomb Wing) was formed, the veteran 98th and 376th BG moved up to Italy from Tunisia, equipped with battered, war-weary Liberators that looked much like this ship. *CHUG-A-LUG* was a B-24D (41-23766) of the 98th BG, and a veteran of the 1 August 1943 low-level Ploesti mission that preceded the formation of the Fifteenth. Although a balloon cable damaged her right wing and a crew member was killed at Ploesti, desert-garbed *CHUG-A-LUG* survived 105 missions and later made a war bond tour of the United States (*via Norman Taylor*)**

Brereton, who was viewed as the brain – or, in the view of some, the culprit – behind the raid. This, naturally, led to a revival of the debate that had raged in other combat theatres over the relative merits of the B-17 and the B-24.

The reader who is interested solely in combat, and does not want to know how it felt to fly the Liberator in the Mediterranean, would be well advised to skip over the next few pages. To everyone else, the significance of the B-24 and its role in Italy cannot be understood without an introduction to the aircraft, and the men who flew it.

**Bound for targets in Germany, B-24Ds of the 376th BG 'Liberandos' head over the Alps during a Combined Bomber Offensive mission in late 1943. Note the mix of camouflage schemes, with most bombers still painted in Desert Pink (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

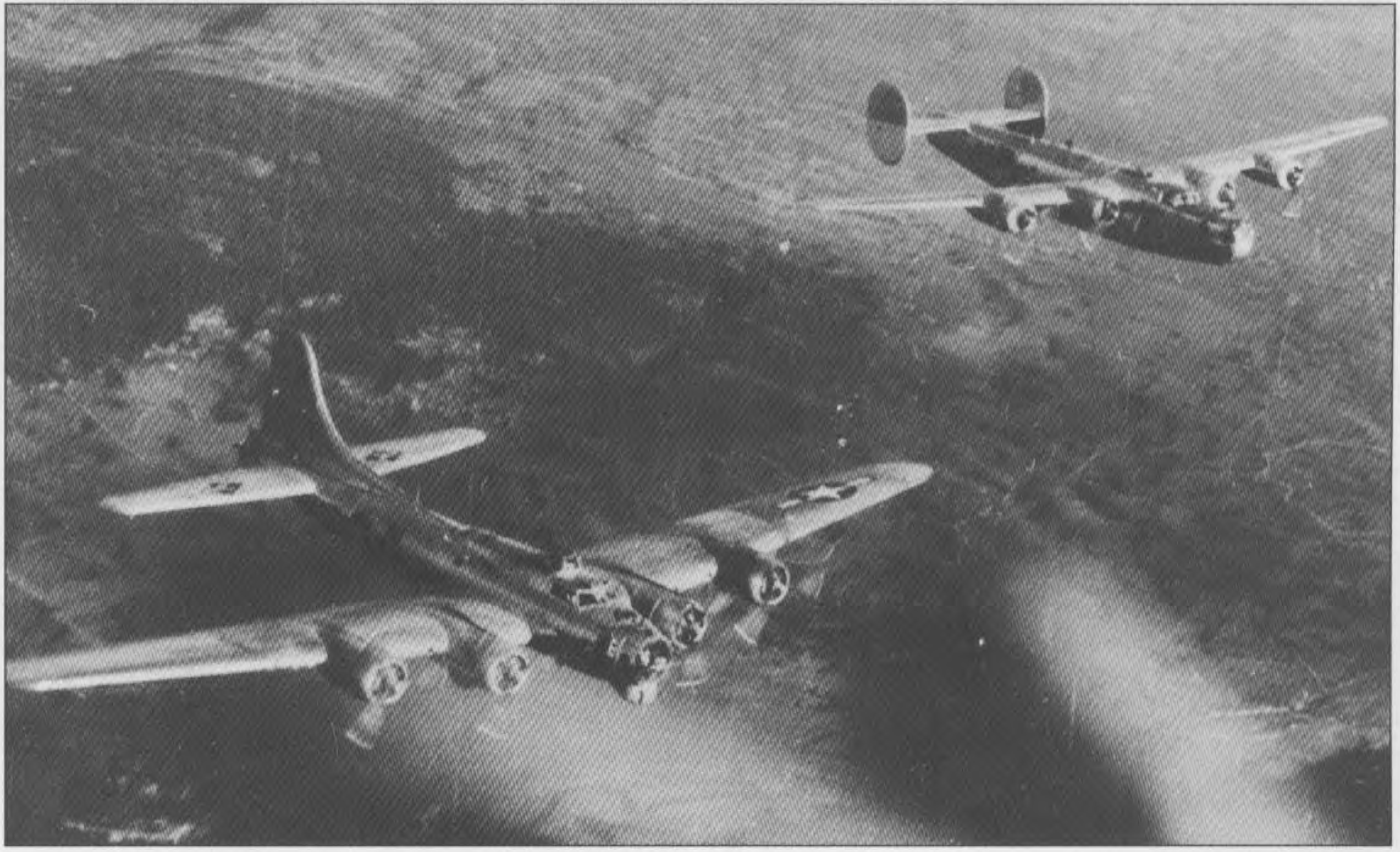
In later years, their bomber eclipsed by the significantly older and less capable B-17, men who flew the B-24 wondered if it was a Boeing publicity machine that did them in. More likely it was a fluke – the accident of chance that produced the evocative nickname Flying Fortress. The popular name assigned to the B-24 was more accurate, and seems an excellent choice but, it never captured the imagination.

The comparison between the two bombers has been made often. The B-17 could reach higher altitude, was easier to fly, may have been slightly more resilient when hit, and was safer to ditch. But the oft-overlooked Liberator, although being more difficult to handle, was significantly faster (a B-24 on three engines could readily overtake a B-17 using all four!), carried a heavier bombload and went farther. The Liberator seemed to have been built with the word 'rugged' in mind, an essential attribute for the Ploesti mission and for operations in the Mediterranean generally.

## FLYING THE B-24

Everyone had something to say about the Liberator, and pilots said it everywhere (in the Pacific, a commander had to sack several officers who asserted their preference for the B-17 after a decision had been made to convert a unit to the B-24). Few, however, found better words for the Consolidated bomber, which ultimately became the backbone of the Fifteenth Air Force, than pilot 1Lt Bud Markel, who (many months after Ploesti) flew with the 827th BS/484th BG out of Torretto;

'The B-24 bomber was a cantankerous, lumbering, draughty, unforgiving son-of-a-bitch, heavy on the controls, overgrossed and difficult to fly in formation, with an ancient boiler gauge-style fuel quantity system that was almost useless. The heaters never worked when you needed them, and were removed by many combat groups as being too dangerous



**A comparison of one of the world's best-known aircraft (foreground) and one of the war's best bombers. This 99th BG B-17G Flying Fortress is seen in formation with an unidentified B-24J Liberator on 7 October 1944 whilst returning from a raid on Vienna. The two types were kept busy in the MTO but were not often seen together (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

to operate because of the fuel lines on the flight deck necessary to feed them.

'Nose steering, such as today's power steering in an automobile, was non-existent. Headway was maintained by throttles and brakes. The famously weak nose gear had a mind of its own, often collapsing of its own volition. So the flight engineer would have to sit astride the mechanism, waiting with a heavy foot to kick the stubborn thing down to lock.

'The Liberator was an aeroplane often ridiculed by the B-17 boys, who delighted in finding hundreds of new derogatory names to call it. Even today, the B-24 versus B-17 controversy continues because every throttle jock and gunner knows that sooner or later you learn to accept and then eventually to love the equipment assigned to you. It's not romance but survival that triggers the match. Familiarity breeds self-confidence, at least in this case. You soon learned not to take off with the cowl flaps open as this caused too much drag. You learned to keep the generators parallel and to plot cruise control charts to calculate fuel consumption, or how to transfer fuel without starving the engines or pumping it overboard. Many would call this becoming professional, but we called it accommodation – a deal struck with the aeroplane, like a stand-off between two boxers who respect each other's strengths. With this out of the way, the war could be attended to.'

**Cruising over a typically cloudy northern Italy, a B-24J from the 451st BG keeps formation with a B-17G from the 2nd BG. This photograph was taken in early 1945 (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

## UNENDING DEBATE

Further on the B-17 versus B-24 debate, 1Lt Guyon Phillips of the 461st BG at Cerignola remembers the Liberator with a realistic point of view;

'The Lib had great engines which gave you minimum problems. And it had the high-lift low-drag Davis wing (although the wing couldn't take much damage compared to the Flying Fort). On the flip side, you could never trim the son-of-a-gun, and had to horse it around constantly. Flying formation gave your left arm a tremendous workout. Later, I found that I could arm-wrestle my college roommate – a big football player – left-handed.

'You made no sudden moves in a B-24. Response time had to be calculated. And then there were the constant gas fumes. You would think that all gas lines in aeroplanes would have been designed to a standard, but somehow the B-24 was in a class of its own. I lost several friends from unexplained accidents which were assumed to be from gas leaks. More than once I had to get on the intercom and tell the guys to put them out. No smoking until the air cleared.

'You always sweated out ditching when you were over open water. The high wing and the soft under-belly didn't offer you much chance if you had to put one down in the ocean. They showed us a film of a B-24 purposely ditched – empty of course, with the skeleton crew in special pads. The pilot put it down perfectly, then the nose went down and when the fuselage righted itself, the nose had broken off. I wish they hadn't shown us that.'

## AIRCRAFT AND CREW

Returning to 1Lyle McCarty of the 459th BG, here he describes his love-hate affair with his bomber;

'You can probably count on the fingers of one hand those 459th BG airmen who were thrilled when assigned to the B-24 Liberator. Even in its day, it was an unusual aeroplane – twin vertical tails, tricycle landing gear and a high aspect ratio wing with a thick airfoil. Compared to its contemporary, the B-17 Flying Fortress, the Liberator lacked grace and beauty, especially when on the ground – where most people first glimpsed it and formed their impressions of the aircraft. One of the few aeroplanes whose landing gear retracted outward into the wing, the Liberator assumed an awkward appearance as the gear came up after take-off. This awkwardness was heightened because the retraction speeds of the two main gears were not synchronised, and one wheel would often lag behind the other, giving the Liberator a kind of crippled look.

'More B-24s were built and flown than any other US aircraft ever. Worldwide, only two aeroplanes have been produced in greater numbers, the German Bf 109 and the Russian Il-2 Stormovik (McCarty has overlooked the Supermarine Spitfire, among others). Several excellent books have been written about the B-24, but they present limited discussion of the everyday use of the aircraft by its crew members.'

McCarty continued, describing the Liberator's crew composition;

'A typical Liberator crew (flying B-24Gs through to B-24Ms in the European Theater of Operations) consisted of ten men. Pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier – positions filled by commissioned officers. Engineer/top turret gunner, radio operator/waist gunner, a second waist gunner, nose gunner, tail gunner and ball gunner were enlisted men. There were minor variations in these assignments, but most crews adhered pretty closely to this pattern.

'Crew positions were well defined – pilot and co-pilot in the cockpit on the flight deck, gunners in their turrets or at the waist guns, and the bombardier in the nose compartment where the bombsight was located. Most navigators rode in the nose compartment too, although some preferred to work at the radio operator's desk located on the flight deck behind the co-pilot. On combat missions in Europe, command radio sets were used only for emergencies such as position reports prior to ditching or bailout, so the radio operator was free to man a waist gun, and his desk was available for the navigator.

'With lead aircraft (group lead, deputy group lead, box leads and deputy box leads), the story was a little different. Precise navigation of the lead ships was critical. In recognition of this, the lead and deputy lead aircraft usually carried two navigators – one on the flight deck (or in the nose) performing dead reckoning, and a second in the nose turret performing pilotage (this spot offered a remarkably good view of the terrain). The pilotage navigator also acted as nose gunner. So, the make-up of a lead crew typically was five officers (pilot, co-pilot, dead reckoning navigator, pilotage navigator/nose gunner and bombardier) and five enlisted men (engineer/top turret gunner, radio operator/waist gunner, a second waist gunner, ball turret gunner and tail turret gunner.

'On radar-equipped (*Mickey*) aircraft a radar operator was added to the crew. He was a rated navigator, so the lead *Mickey* ships actually carried three navigators. The crew make-up of a *Mickey* lead ship was six officers and four enlisted men. There was no ball turret gunner because the ball turret was replaced by a radome. *Mickey* ships had no belly defence.'

## GETTING ABOARD

McCarty is correct in his belief that real-world descriptions of flying the B-24 – as thousands of men were to do in the Mediterranean – do not always have the ring of authenticity. He continues;

'Flying in the 1940s bore little resemblance to flying today. The B-24 and its contemporaries were designed for utility, not convenience or even safety as we now define it. Take the matter of access to the aircraft. There were no doors, and the hatches were inconvenient and awkward to use – the crew usually entered via the bomb-bay. Crew members simply ducked to clear the lower edges of the opened bomb-bay doors (the door design was akin to that of a roll-top desk cover) and entered the bomb-bay, stepped onto the catwalk and then took a couple of extra long steps (about two feet each) up to the flight deck. Nothing graceful about entering this aeroplane!

'There were two other primary means of entry. The bombardier, navigator and nose gunner could enter the aeroplane by crouching under the nose and squeezing up into the nose compartment via the nose wheel door opening – another rather awkward manoeuvre involving close encounters with the nose wheel tyre and strut. This was the preferred access path for crew members who occupied the nose. Loading their gear into the nose in this fashion was much easier than entering the bomb-bay and then carrying items through the cramped tunnel linking the bomb-bay/flight deck area with the nose.

'Finally, there was the bottom hatch located toward the rear of the fuselage – it provided access to the waist (you could also enter the waist via the bomb-bay). This hatch might be called, in today's parlance, the most ergonometrically designed of the access paths, never mind that ergonomics is a concept of which the designers at Consolidated obviously lacked all knowledge – its hinged door opened inward, and on some models was complete with an extensible ladder that reached almost to ground level. In the absence of a ladder, crew members simply reached inside the hatch and pulled themselves up into the waist.

'Once on board, the question was where to go. For the pilot and co-pilot the answer to that question was easy – their stations were clearly defined. These two gentlemen occupied the only seats in the aircraft that were equipped with safety belts. On some aircraft these seats were also provided with armour plating, which was configured in such a way that the seats resembled coffins, surrounding the backs and sides of the pilots' heads and upper bodies. Such an arrangement further restricted rear vision, which wasn't especially good to start with on the B-24. Everyone else pretty much fended for himself.

'The nose compartment was not occupied during taxying, take-off or landing because of its vulnerability to crash damage and the difficulty of escape should the nose wheel collapse – a fairly common occurrence with the B-24. For like reasons, turrets were also unoccupied during these operations.

'The navigator and the bombardier often, though not always, sat on the flight deck during taxying and take-off, with the rest of the crew (other than the pilot, co-pilot and engineer) riding in the waist. Shortly after take-off the navigator, bombardier and nose gunner would crawl through the narrow tunnel leading from the area under the flight deck to the nose compartment. Gunners would take up their stations manning the nose, tail and ball turrets, and the waist guns, and the crew would be on its way.

'On most Liberators, the flight deck contained an inward-facing bench located in the rear of the bulkhead behind the pilot – across the flight deck, behind the co-pilot's aft bulkhead, was the radio operator's table and chair (neither the bench nor the chair was equipped with a seat belt or other restraint). Usually, these seats were occupied by some of the crew members during taxy, take-off and landing – others simply stood, sat or lay in the waist.

In the waist, there were no seats, let alone restraints, despite the fact that the interior of the aeroplane fairly bristled with sharp, unyielding objects and appurtenances which often inflicted severe injuries on the unrestrained occupants in a collision, crash-landing, ditching or even in heavy turbulence. Crew members also lacked safety equipment such as crash helmets, padding and fire-resistant clothing. This total disregard for safety may appear odd in today's world, but it seemed never to concern the men who designed, built or flew Liberators in World War 2.'

## MORE ON CONDITIONS

McCarty returns, in his description of the Liberator bomber, to the conditions under which crews flew and fought. Many of these, too, may seem odd in today's world;

'Bone chilling cold was the constant companion of every Liberator crew member. Air ingress was everywhere, especially at the bomb-bay doors, which had nothing even remotely resembling seals. Missions were flown with the waist windows open and, of course, the bomb-bay doors were open during the bomb runs, which typically lasted ten to fifteen minutes. Temperatures at 25,000 ft (7620 m) varied from zero to as much as 70 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Only the flight deck was equipped with heaters, and their operation was erratic.

'Crew members wore electrically-heated suits, including gloves and slippers – the forerunners of electric blankets. These failed frequently, so it was always advisable to wear heavy, or at least medium-weight, flying suits and boots over the electrically-heated suit – severe discomfort and frostbite could be the result of not doing so.

'Besides the cold, there was the noise. The aeroplane's fuselage was uninsulated, so engines, propellers and slipstream combined to set up an ear-splitting din despite the earphones and helmet ear flaps that were worn. This, perhaps, was a blessing in disguise, for the steady drone of four good engines was truly a security blanket. Best of all, the noise created by the aircraft made it impossible to hear anything but the most proximate of flak detonations. Watching flak blossom in silence was unnerving enough – had the sound effects that accompanied the bursting of the shells been audible to the crews, bomb runs would have been all the more frightening.

'On the other hand, the high noise levels tended to isolate crew members, especially those in turrets. A crew member could suffer anoxia without his buddies knowing. More than one B-24 returned to base with a dead gunner in his turret, the victim of a faulty oxygen system or an incorrect oxygen hook-up. To combat this, crews in my bomb group – the 459th BG – conducted regular oxygen checks. These were usually initiated by the bombardier when flying at altitudes above 10,000 ft (3048 m).

'In keeping with their total disregard for crew comfort, Consolidated engineers gave little thought to the need for urination, despite B-24 mission lengths frequently exceeding eight hours. Most aeroplanes had relief tubes at the pilot's and co-pilot's stations – some also had them in the ball turret and in the waist. There were no such provisions in the nose of the Liberator, so most navigators, bombardiers and nose gunners just held it.

'Any use of the pilots' relief tubes at altitude during a mission was likely to bring on tirades of vulgarity from the ball and tail turret gunners, because urine discharged from the tubes would swirl in the slipstream and freeze on the turrets, obstructing the gunners' views. Crew members seldom used the relief tubes anyway because their layered clothing and other items such as parachute harnesses made it very awkward.

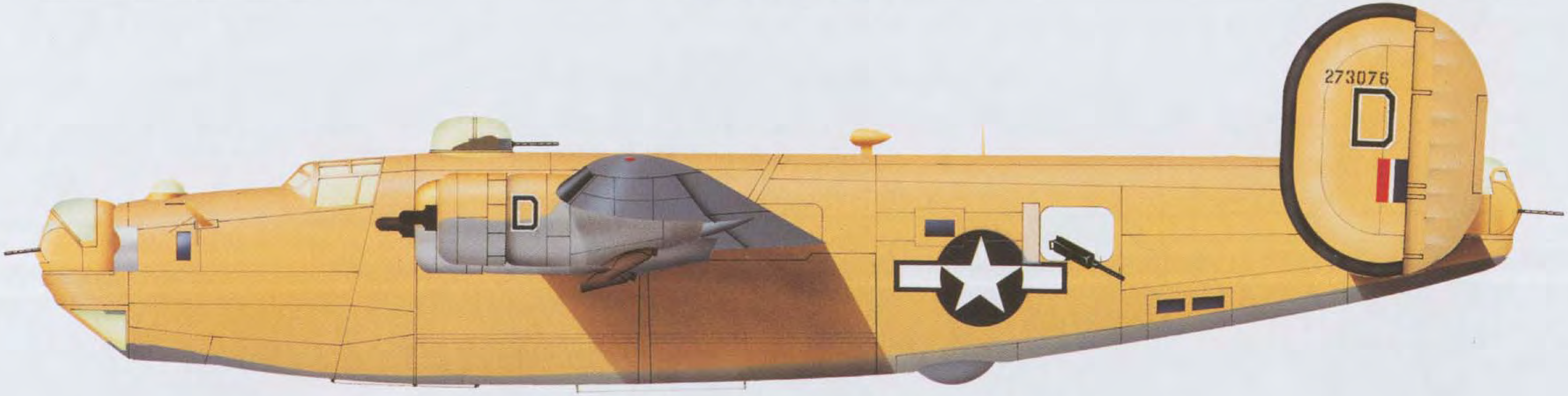
'The bomb-bay of the B-24 was designed in two sections. It was about double the volume of the bomb-bay sported by the B-17. Other than its spaciousness, the two most distinguishing features of the Liberator's bomb-bay were the unusual doors and the catwalk that extended through the bay, linking the flight deck to the waist of the aircraft. Like the cover of a roll-top desk, the B-24's bomb-bay doors consisted of numerous segments hinged together – to open, the doors simply ran up on exterior tracks located on each side of the fuselage. This was a very compact arrangement that worked quite well in those days of unpressurised aircraft.'

## UNIQUE B-24

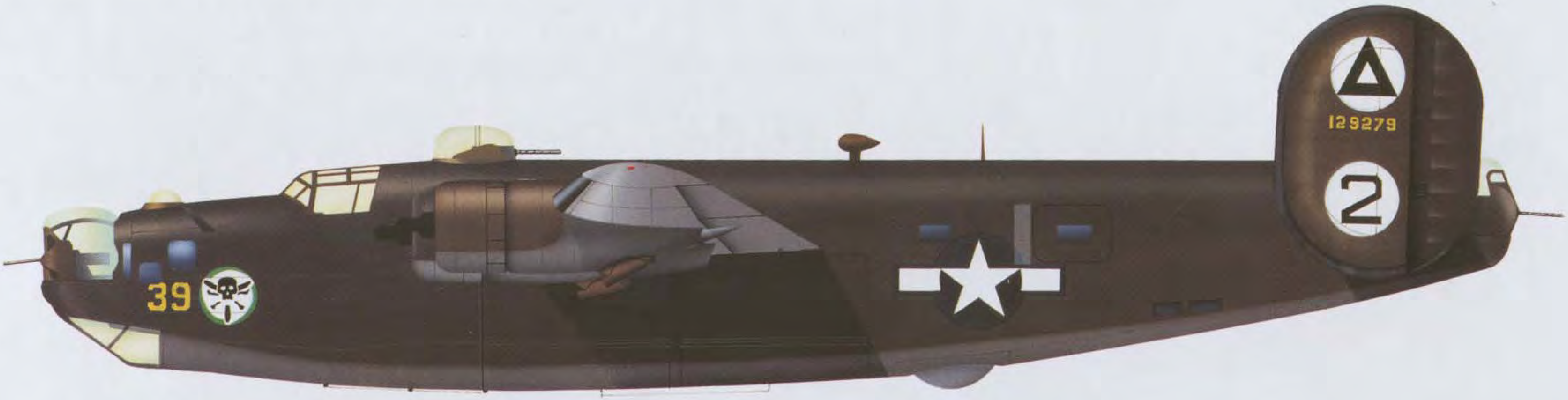
It was, very simply, different from any other aircraft. Some of its features were infuriating. But when US bomber strength in the Mediterranean was being built up, no other aircraft was seriously considered as the backbone of the effort. And when plans were made to strike petroleum refineries in Romania, no other bomber could offer the range or the bomb-carrying capacity needed to tackle the mission.

The subsequent chapters within this book tell the story of the B-24's service with the Fifteenth Air Force. But on 1 August 1943, formation of this organisation was still some three months away. And the Liberator was about to spread its wings in the monumental tidal wave that was to fall over Ploesti.

# COLOUR PLATES



1
**B-24J-10-CO 42-73076 of the 376th BG, San Pancrazio, Italy, late 1943**



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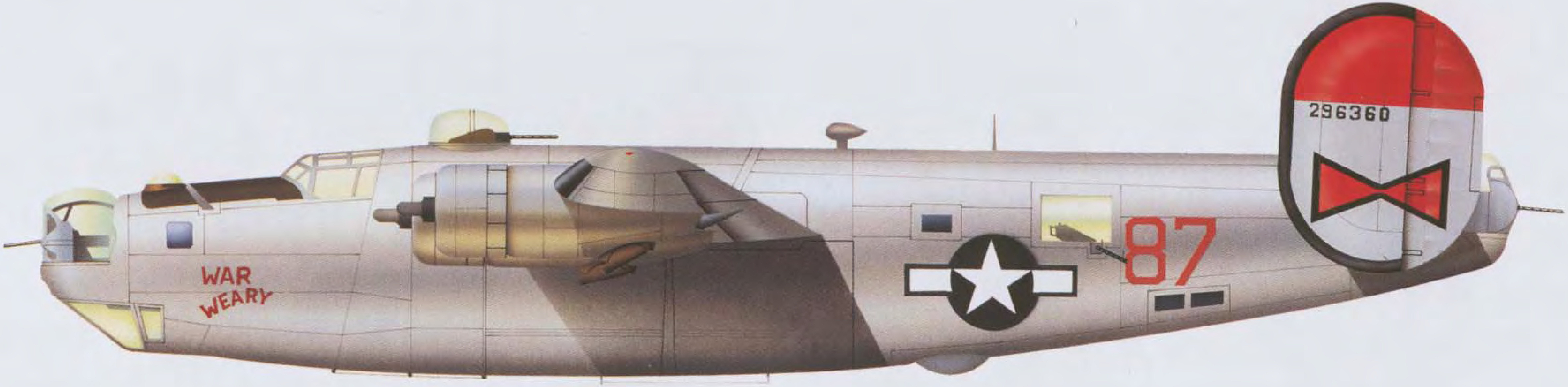
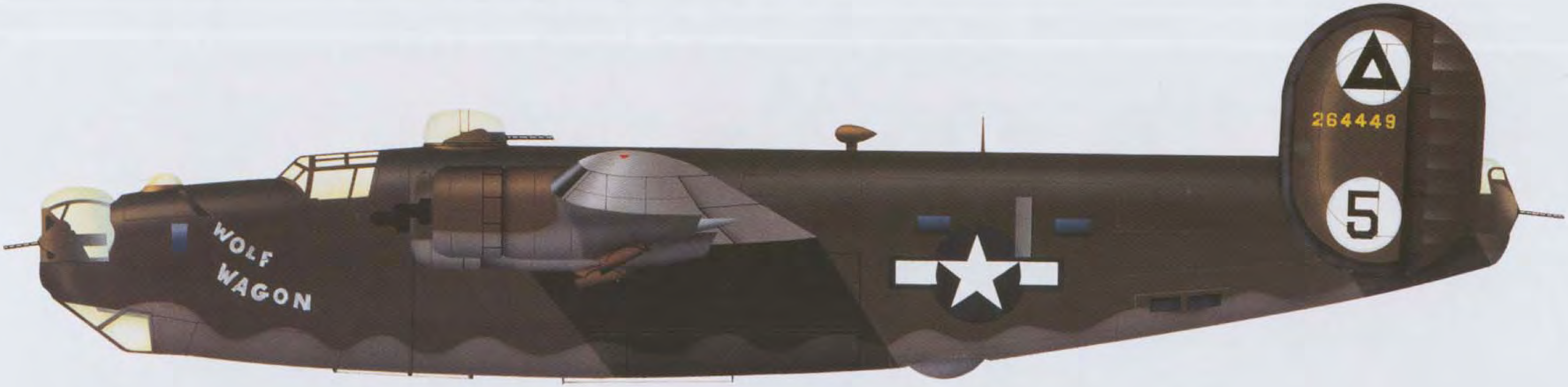
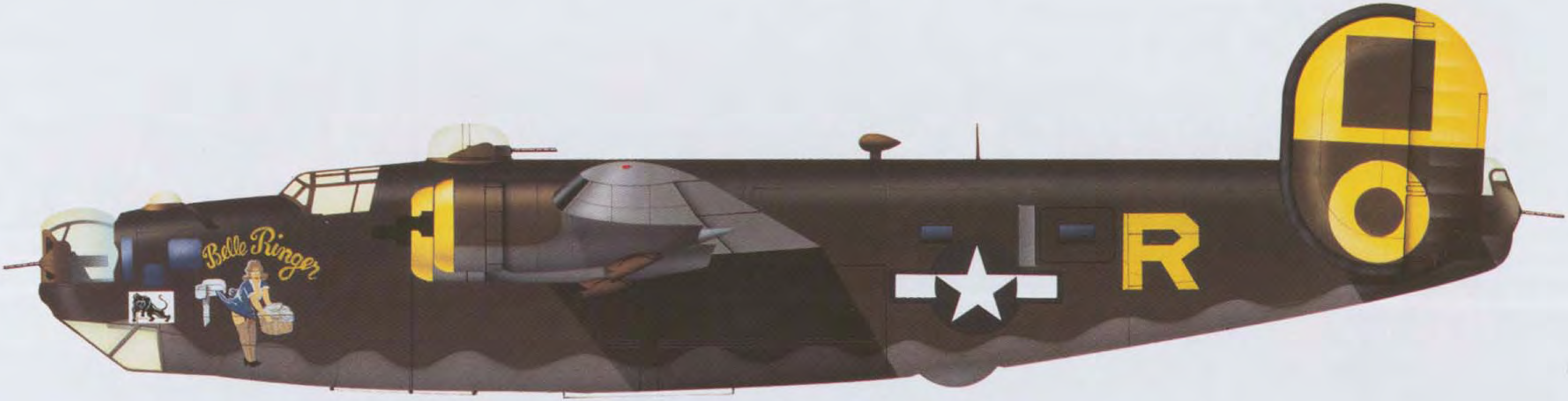
**B-24H-CF 41-29279 of the 512th BS/376th BG, San Pancrazio, Italy, early 1944**


296360
87
WAR
WEARY

**3**
B-24H-30-FO 42-96360 *WAR WEARY* of the 484th BG, Torretto, Italy, 1944

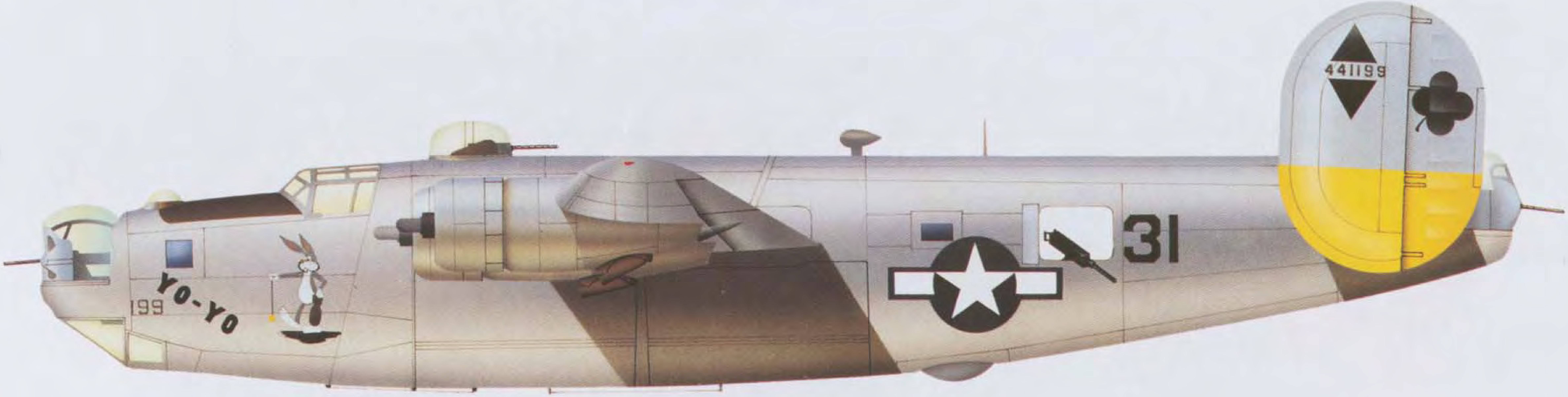

264449
5
WOLF
WAGON

**4**
B-24H-CF 42-64449 *WOLF WAGON* of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, early 1944


Belle Ringer
R

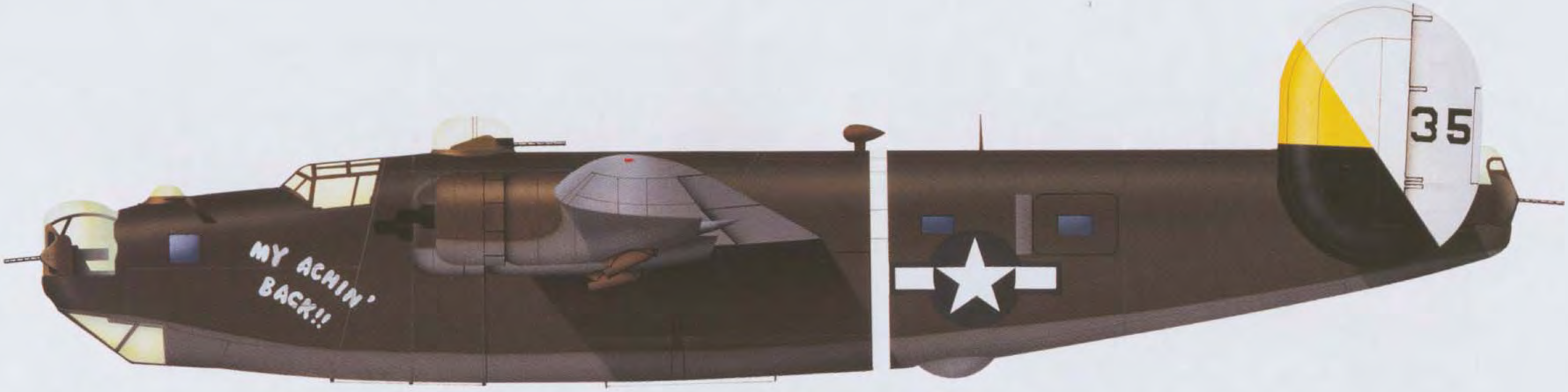
5

B-24H-15-FO 42-52347 *Belle Ringer* flown by 1Lt Erwin Janoviak, 763rd BS/460th BG, Spinazzola, Italy, June 1944


441199
31
YO-YO
199

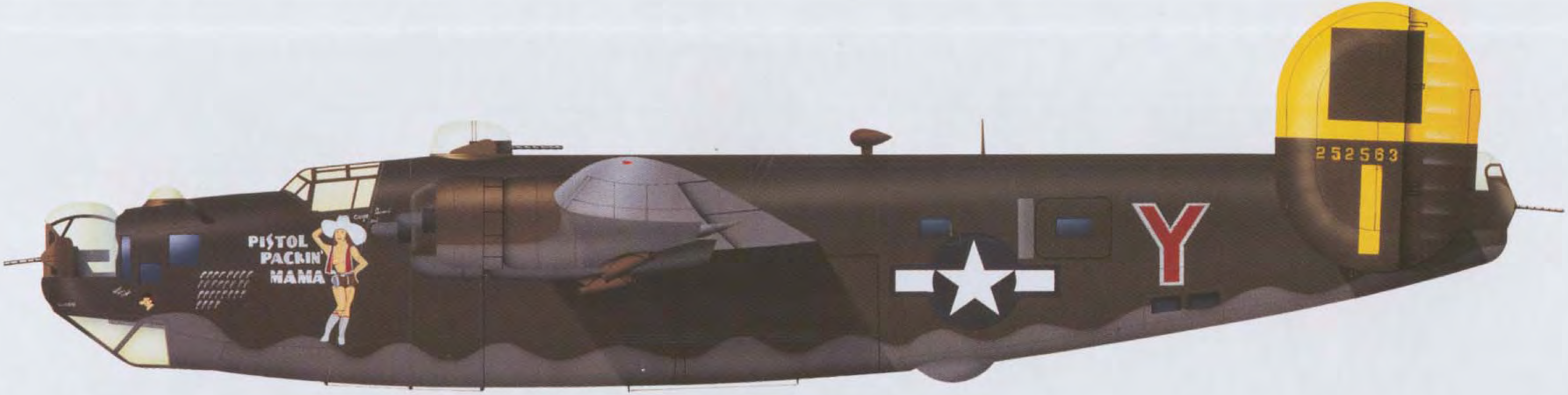
6

B-24J-200-CO 44-41199 *YO-YO* of the 741st BS/455th BG, San Giovanni, Italy, late 1944


MY ACHIN' BACK!!
35

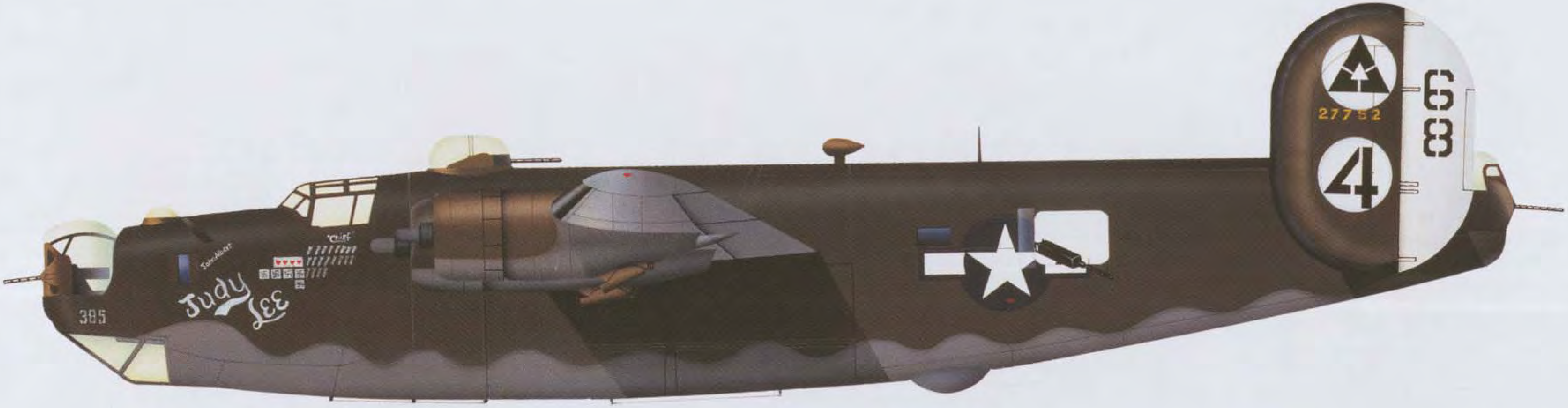
**7**

B-24H (sub-type and serial unknown) *MY ACHIN' BACK!!* of the 449th BG, Grottaglie, Italy, early 1945


PISTOL PACKIN' MAMA
252563
Y

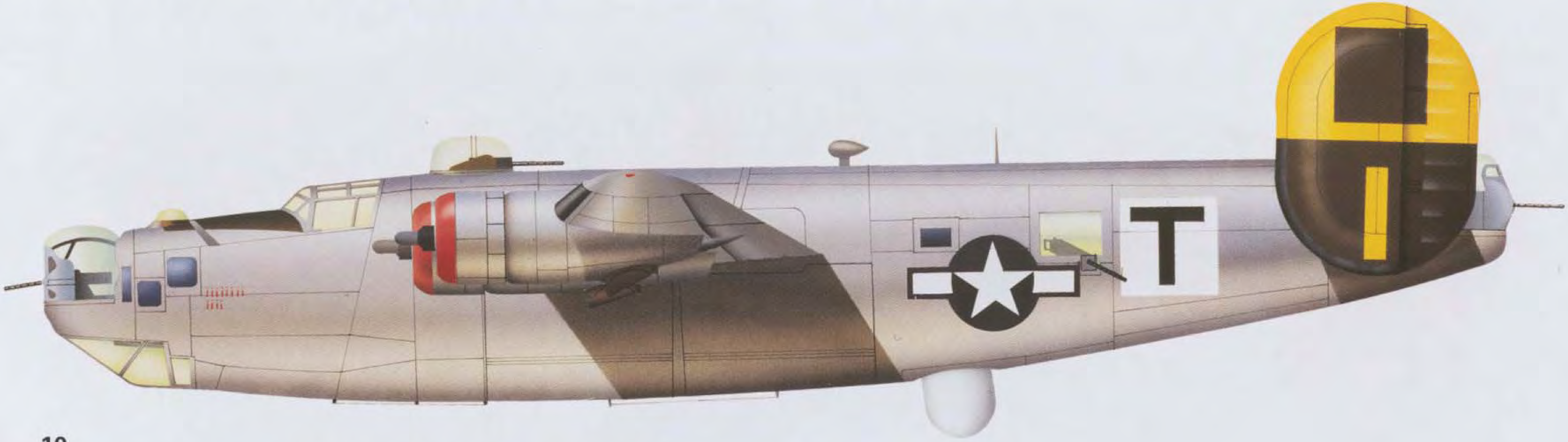
**8**

B-24H-15-FO 42-52563 *PISTOL PACKIN' MAMA* of the 464th BG, Pantanella, Italy, 1944


385
Judy Lee
"Chief"
27752
6
8
4

**9**

B-24H-5-FO 42-7752 *Judy Lee* of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, 1944



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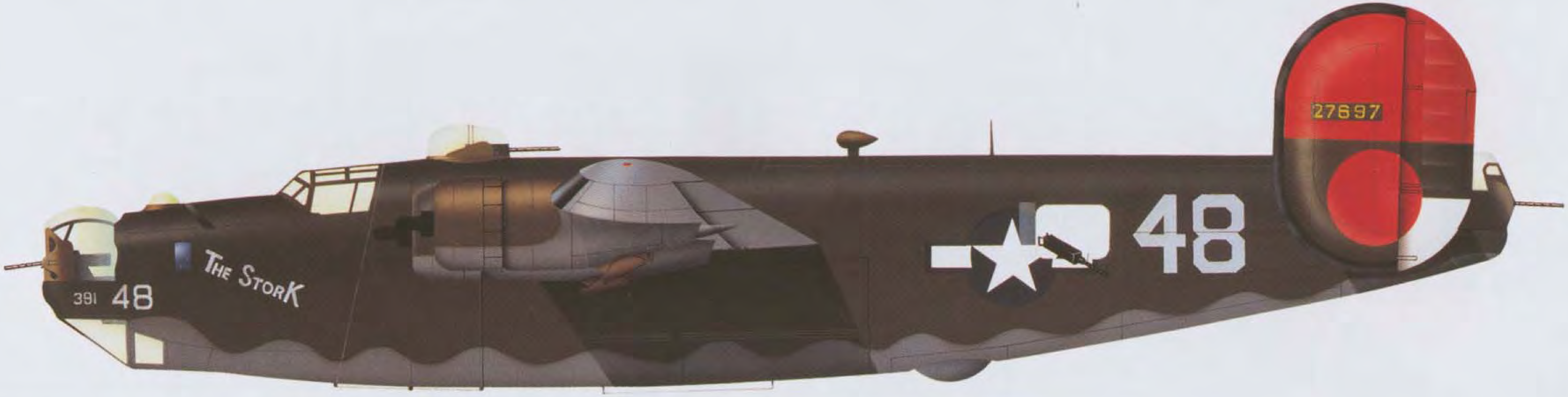
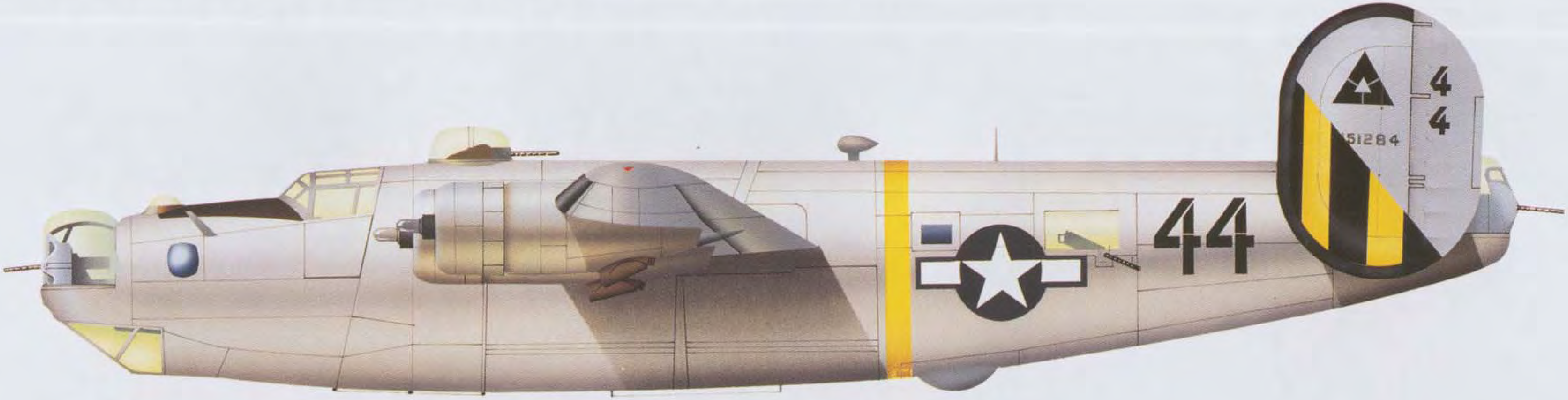

27697
48
THE STORK
391 48

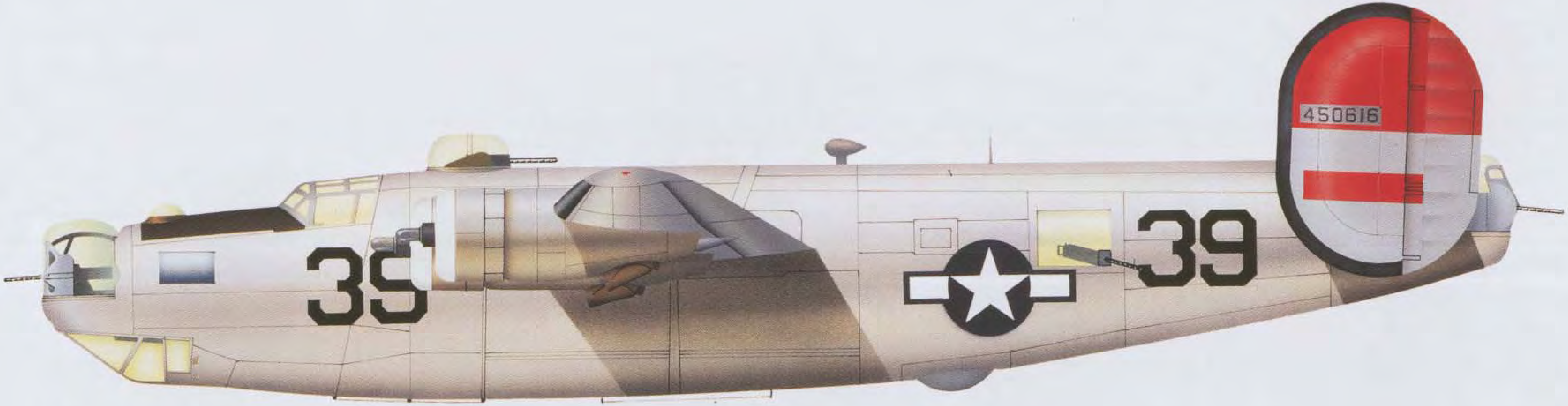
**11**

B-24H-1-FO 42-7697 *THE STORK* of the 726th BS/451st BG, Castelluccio, Italy, summer 1944


4
4
151284
44

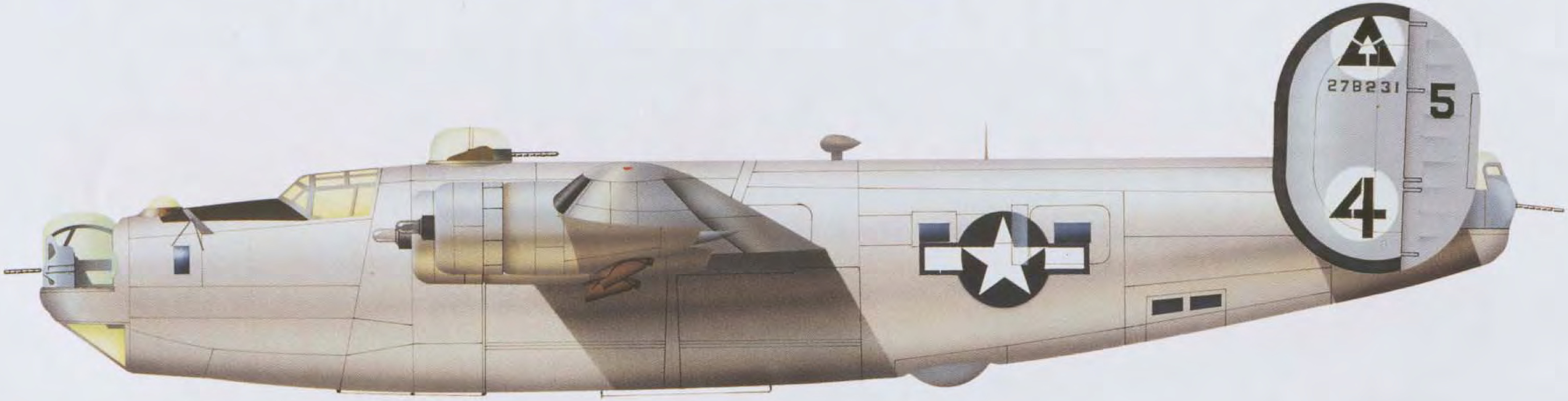
**12**

B-24J-1-DT 41-51284 of the 721st BS/450th BG, Manduria, Italy, spring 1945


450616
39
39

13

B-24M-5-FO (some sources state B-24J) 44-50616 of the 765th BS/461st BG, Torretto Field, Cerignola, Italy, late 1944



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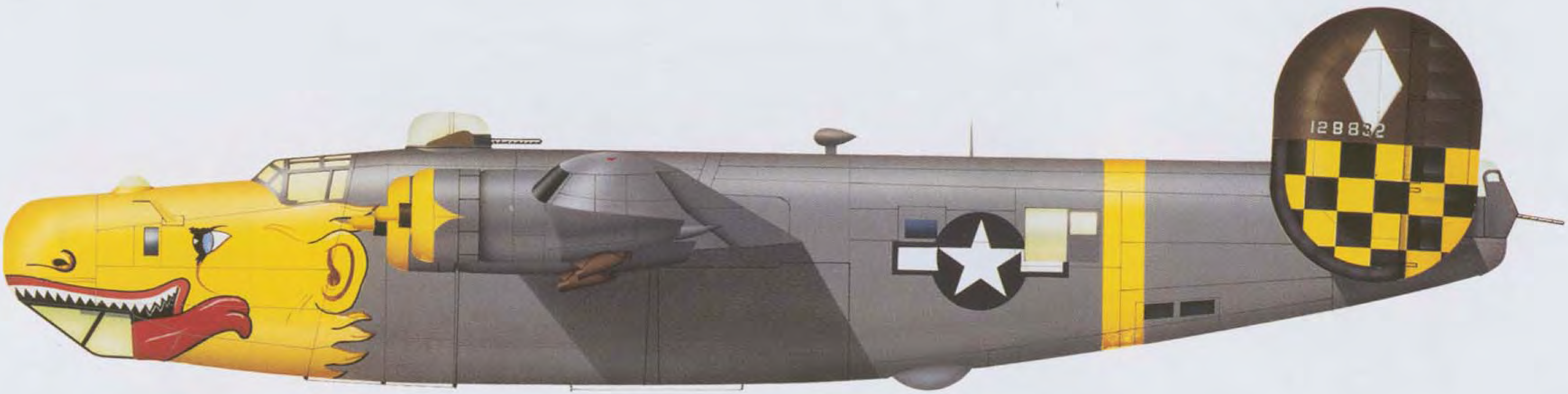
B-24G-10-NT 42-78231 of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, late 1944



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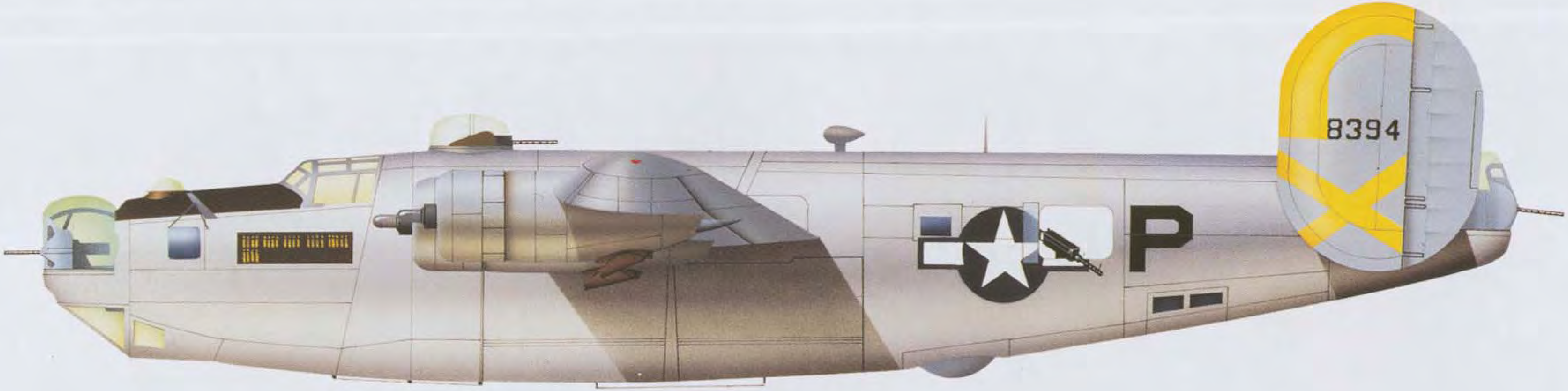
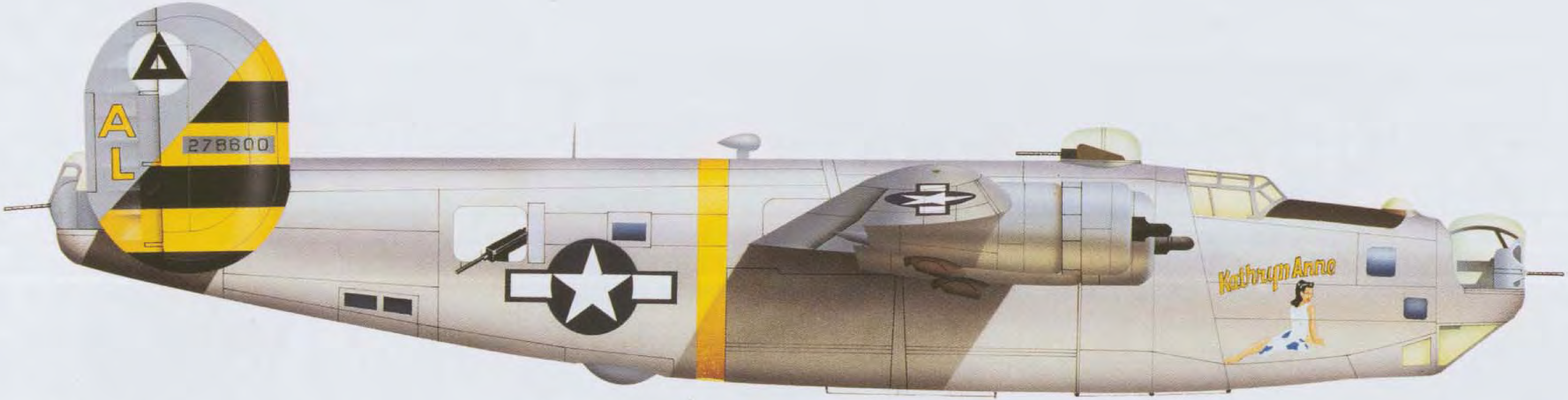
B-24H-15-DT 41-28832 of the 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, late 1944

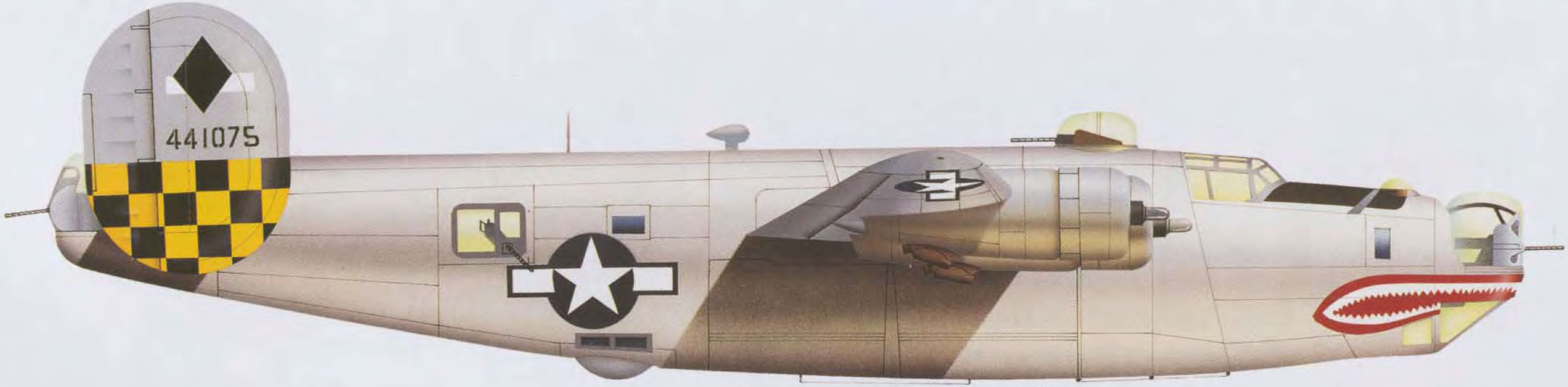


**16**
B-24G-16-NT 42-78394 of the 485th BG, Venosa, Italy, early 1945


A
L
278600
Kathryn Anne

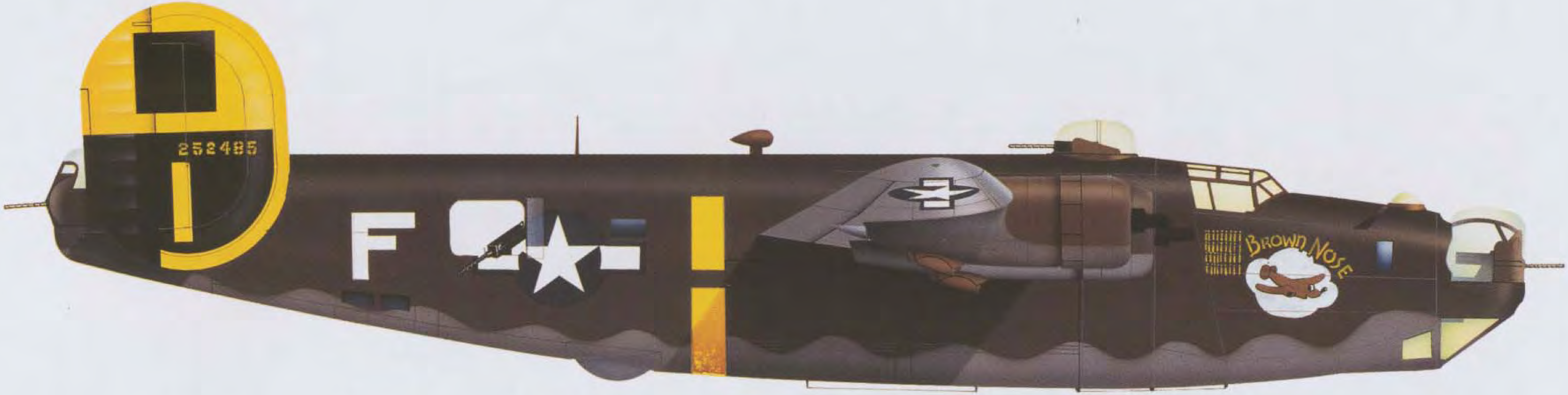
17

B-24J-1-NT 42-78600 *Kathryn Anne/DOPEY* flown by 1Lt Robert McKee, 98th BG, Marcianise, Italy, April 1945

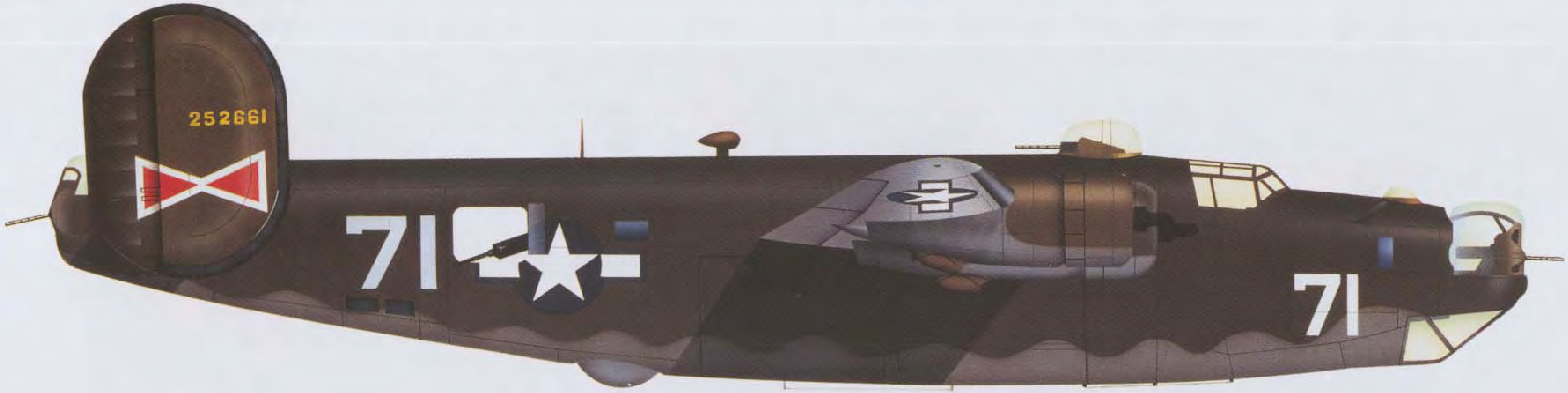


18

B-24J-195-CO 44-41075 flown by 2Lt Conrad C Alder, 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, March 1945


252485
F
Brown Nose

**19**
B-24H-15-FO 42-52485 *BROWN NOSE* flown by 1Lt Samuel B Peskin, 464th BG, Pantanella, Italy, October 1944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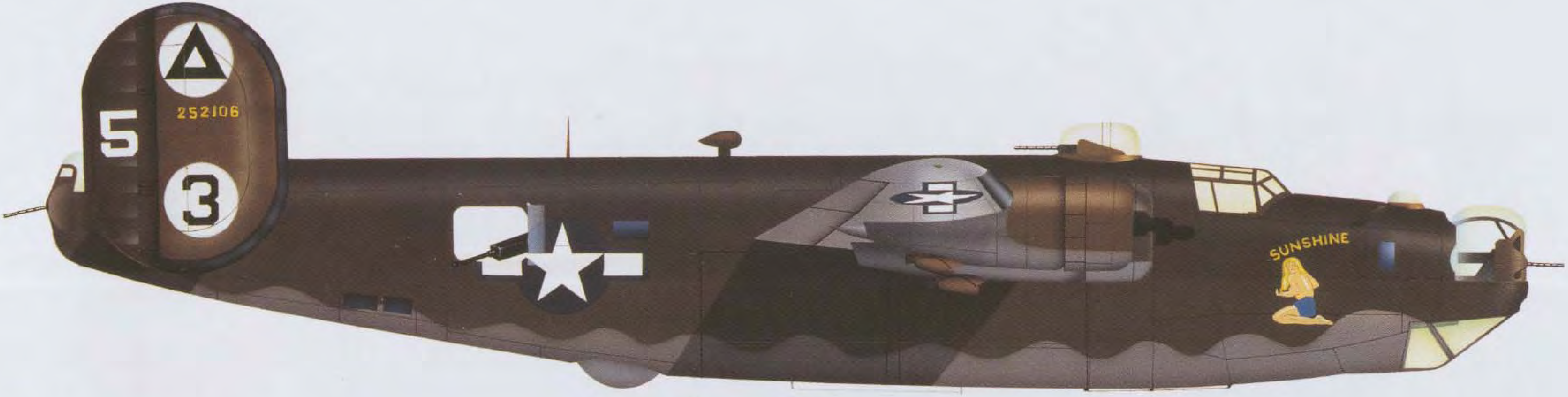
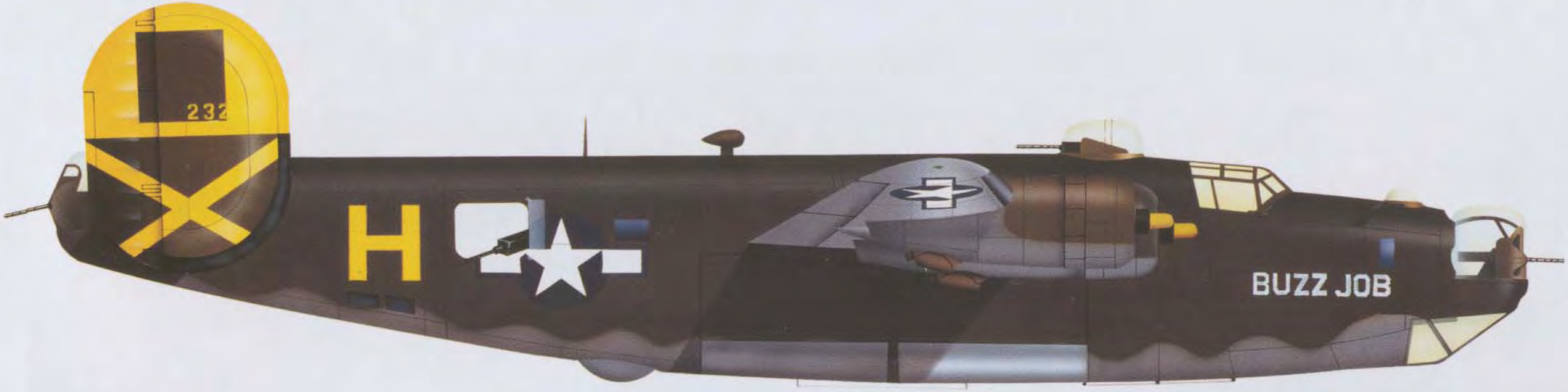
71
71

**20**
B-24H-15-FO 42-52661 flown by 2Lt Edward Eibs, 484th BG, Torretto Field, Italy, June 1944


5
252106
3
SUNSHINE

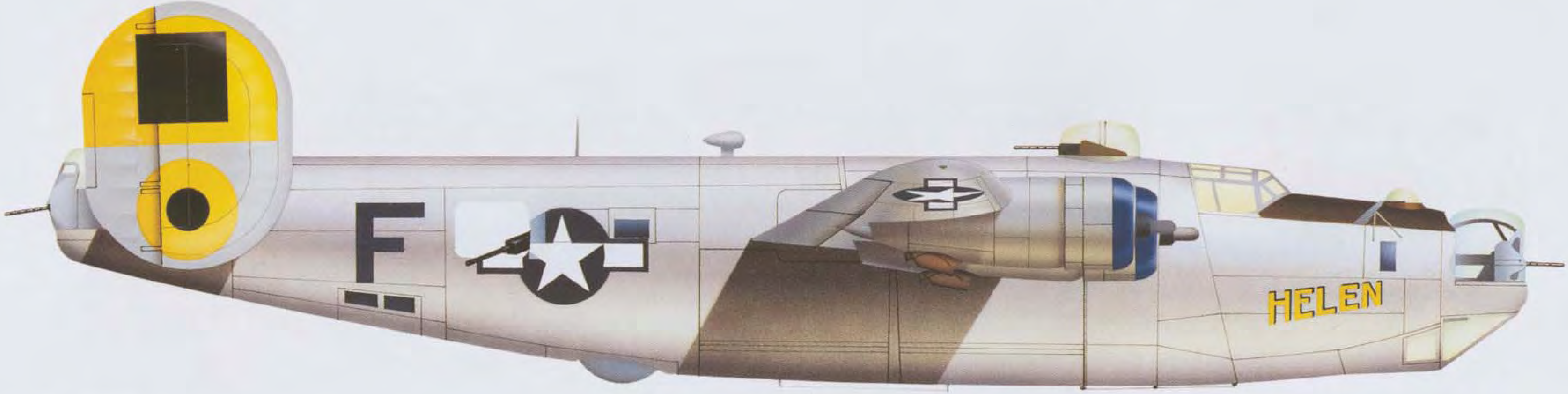
**21**

B-24H-5-FO 42-52106 *SUNSHINE* flown by 2Lt Gifford T Hemphill, 719th BS/449th BG, Grottaglie, Italy, March 1944


232
H
BUZZ JOB

**22**

B-24H-5-FO ??-232?? *BUZZ JOB* of the 485th BG, Venosa, Italy, 1944



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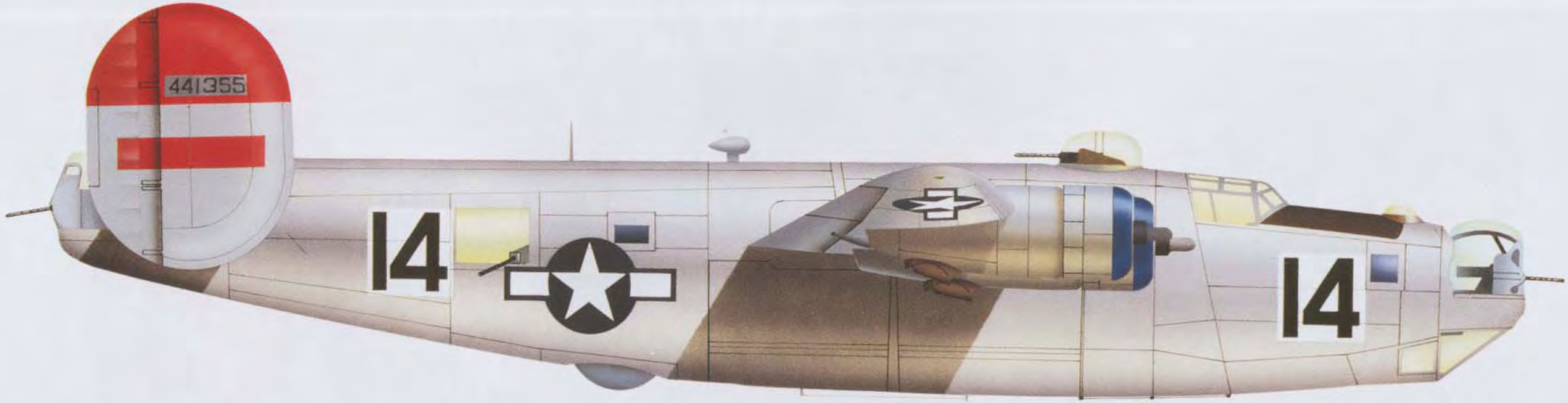
B-24J (sub-type and serial unknown) *HELEN* of the 760th BS/460th BG, Spinazzola, Italy, 1944


441355
14
14

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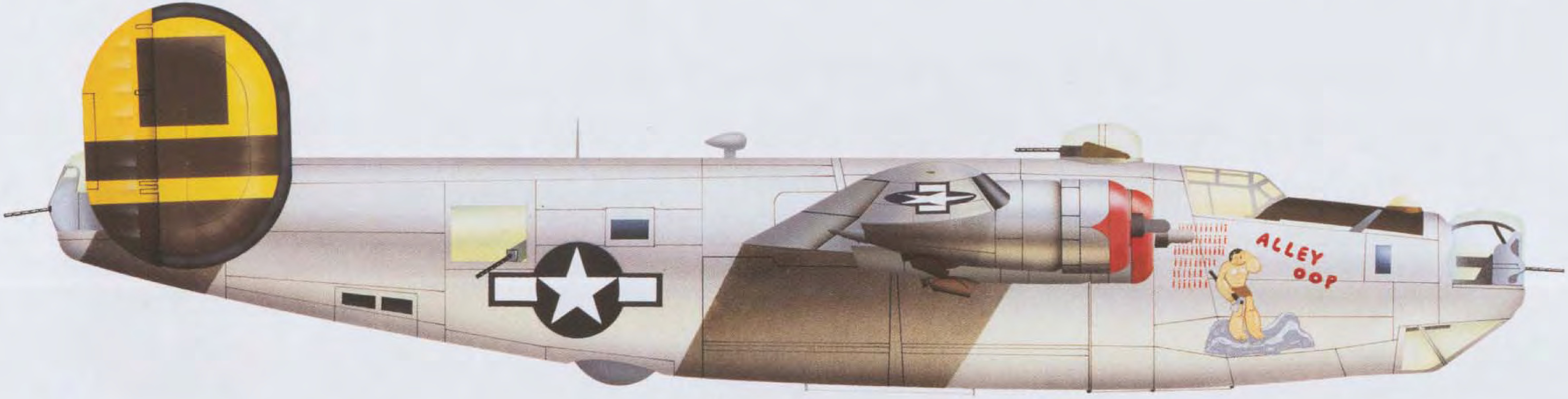
B-24J-120-CO 44-41355 of the 764th BS/461st BG, Torretto Field, Italy, 1944



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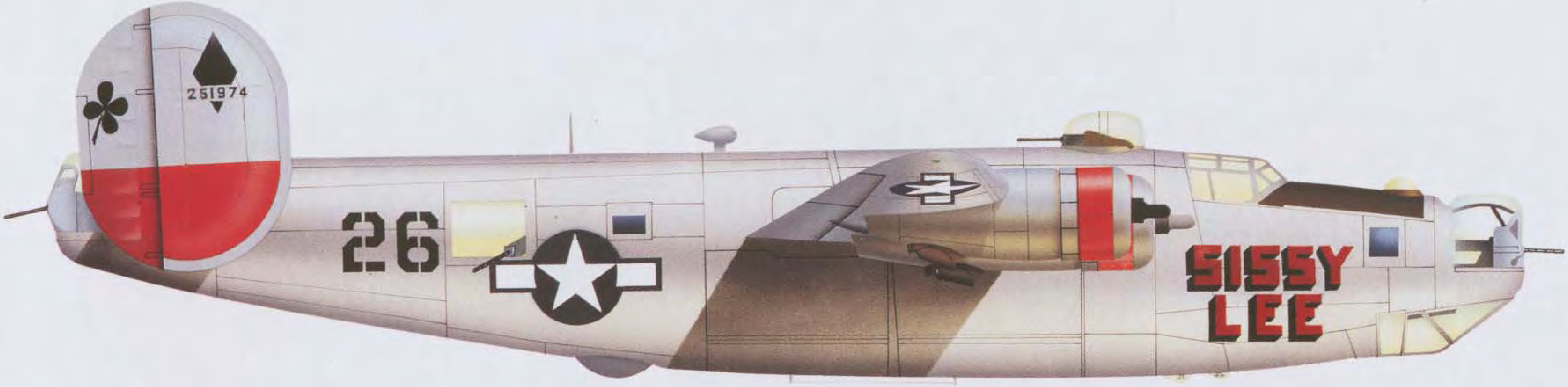
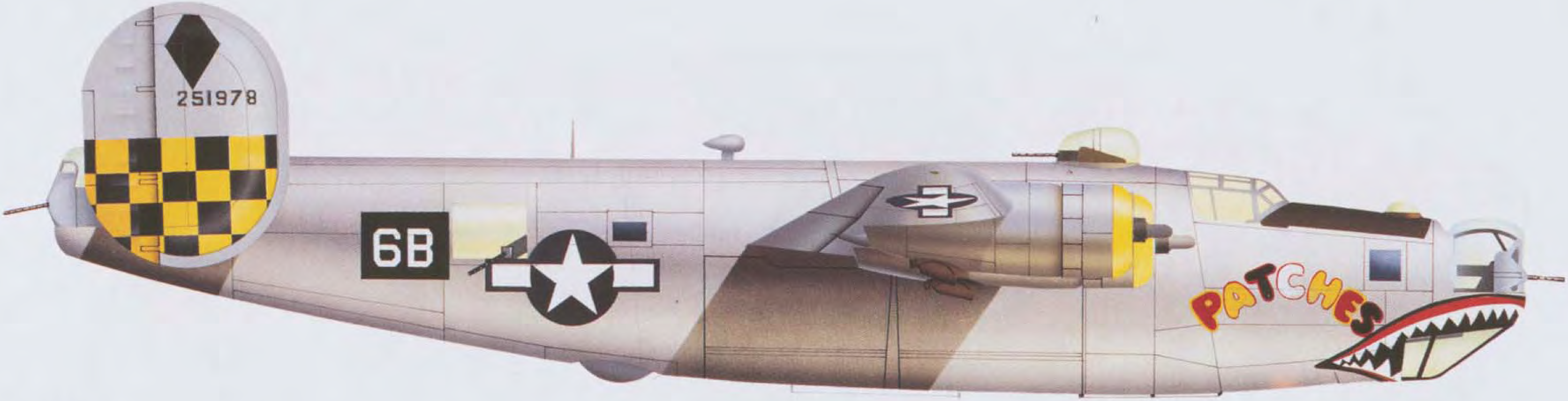
B-24H (sub-type and serial unknown) *ALLEY OOP* flown by 1Lt John McManus, 780th BS/465th BG, Pantanella (Foggia), Italy, 1945

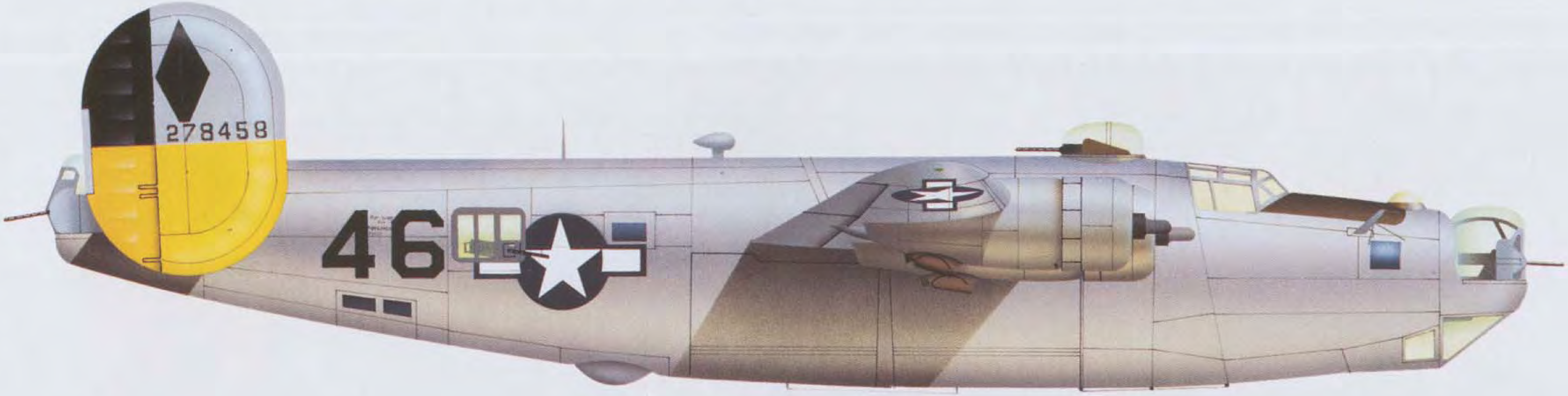

251974
26
SISSY
LEE

**26**

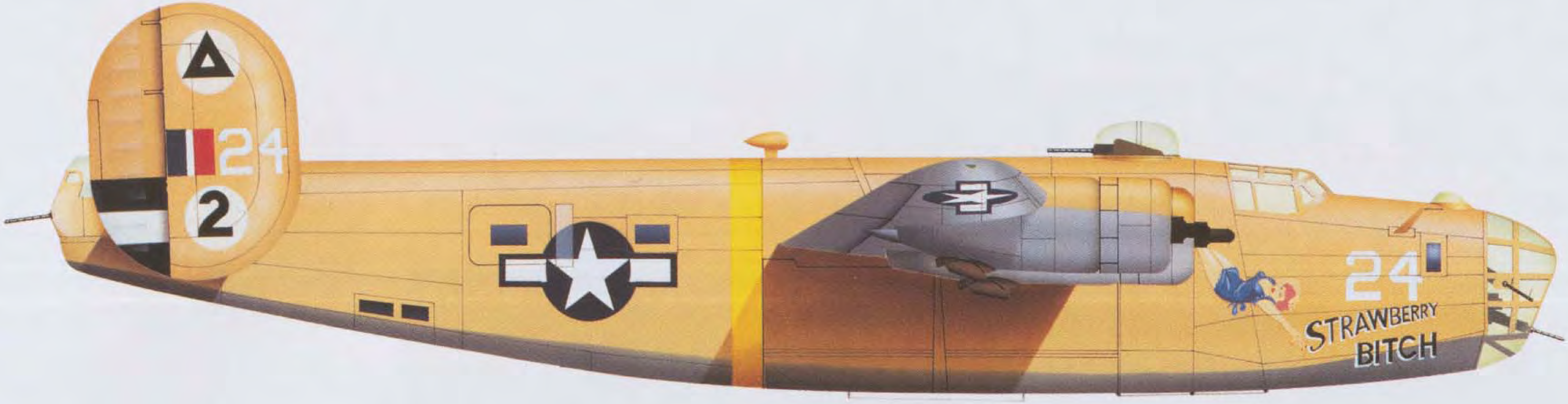
B-24J-20-FO 42-51974 *SISSY LEE* flown by 1Lt Joseph C Clayton, 456th BG, February 1945


251978
6B
PATCHES

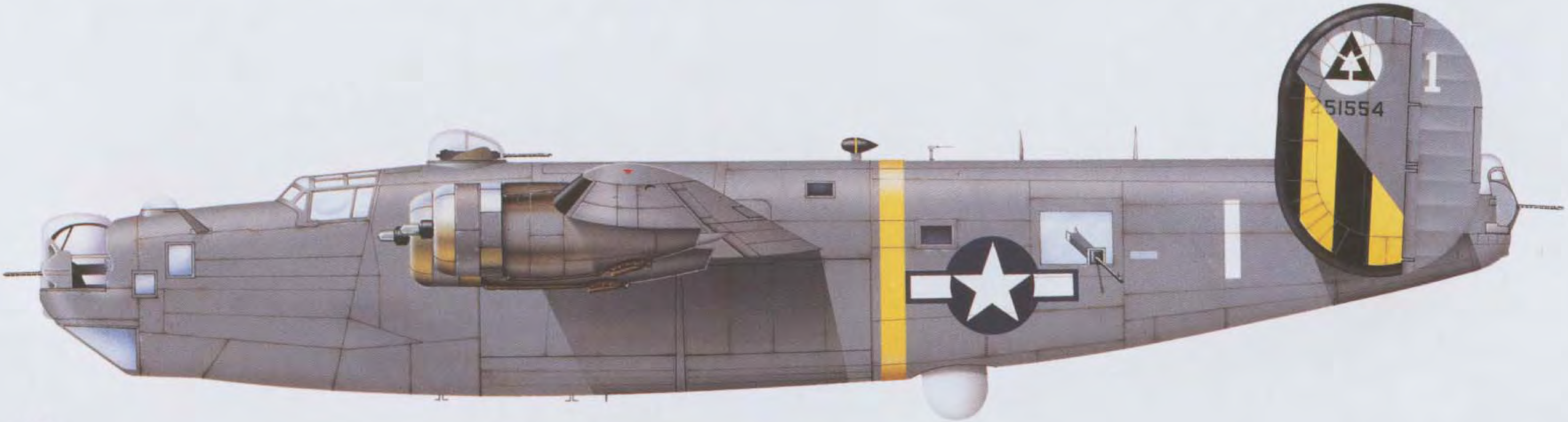
27
B-24J-15-FO 42-51978 *PATCHES* of the 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, 1944



28
B-24G-16-NT 42-78458 flown by 1Lt Thomas P Faulkner, 455th BG, San Giovanni, Italy, February 1945


24
2
24
STRAWBERRY
BITCH

**29**
B-24D 42-72842 *STRAWBERRY BITCH* of the 376th BG, Benghazi, Libya, late 1943



**30**
B-24J-5-CO 42-51554 of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, late 1944

# PROLOGUE – PLOESTI

The MTO evokes many images, from the early Allied landings in North Africa to heavy bomber raids mounted from Italian airfields, aimed at the heartland of the Third Reich. To many, the term 'MTO' is Fifteenth Air Fore, created on 1 November 1943 to oversee the theatre's air operations. In fact, the B-24, and the American airmen who maintained and flew it, were fighting in the Mediterranean much earlier, sometimes in squadron-sized units, sometimes in concert with other air forces, and for a period as part of the Ninth and Twelfth Air Forces.

## PLOESTI

The most important prelude to the subsequent formation of the Fifteenth Air Force was the 1 August 1943 low-level mission against Ploesti. Carried out by five American B-24 Liberator groups, the raid was launched from five bases around Benghazi, Libya.

Taking part were three B-24 outfits detached from the Eighth Air Force in England, namely the 93rd BG (nicknamed 'Ted's Traveling Circus'), commanded by Lt Col Addison Baker, the 44th BG (known as the 'Eight Balls') and the 389th BG (the 'Sky Scorpions'). They joined K K Compton's 376th BG ('Liberandos') and the 98th BG ('Pyramiders'), under Col John 'Killer' Kane, which was now also subordinate to the Ninth Air Force and, for a few weeks, the Twelfth. Kane was a spirited and volatile leader, much-admired but a contrast to the quiet, experienced and much-loved Col Leon Johnson of the 44th BG. The 98th and 376th BGs later came under the Fifteenth's control.

The Allies believed that sending heavy bombers against German oil production would strike a major blow, altering the course of the war. The comfort of Liberator crews was immaterial, and the temporary airfields around Benghazi offered little more than basic accommodation – only tents, dusty perimeter roads, mobile kitchens or canned rations, and gritty sand, sand, sand everywhere. While the Liberator groups were forming in North Africa, Italian saboteurs succeeded in coming ashore one night from a submarine and attacking an airfield, killing two Americans and blowing up four aircraft.

This did nothing to slow down the pace of relentless, low-level practice missions. Liberator crews worked themselves to the edge of exhaustion on gruelling training flights over the Libyan sands. Even a blind man could have guessed that the Liberator were preparing for a secret mission, flying so low they scraped their bellies on the desert.

All five groups were equipped with the B-24D Liberator, powered by four 1900-hp (895-kW) Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp turbocharged radial engines. The B-24D was credited with a maximum speed of 291 mph (467 km/h). On a practical mission with a real-world fuel load, the B-24 could carry a greater bomb load than the B-17, typically 8000 lb (3628 kg) vis-à-vis 6000 lb (2721 kg). It could take any load farther and fly faster. Alas, the B-24D model was not well-equipped with armour or defensive guns – but payload, speed and range were the qualities most needed in the attack on Ploesti, and the B-24 offered them all.

The air forces' commander in the region, Maj Gen Lewis H Brereton, was in North Africa following horrific defeats in the Philippines in 1941 and Java in 1942. He had been Gen Douglas MacArthur's air commander when Japan launched its attack, and had been largely prevented by him from using his bomber force effectively. When commenting on his plans for the Ploesti raid, Brereton remarked;

'I feel the surprise element will weigh heavily in our favour. It is necessary to insure the heaviest possible damage in the first attack. Because of the long distance involved, over 2000 miles (3218 kilometres), and the danger of bad weather, I feel that our formations might get dispersed and not hit the target so effectively from a high altitude as they would in a low-level attack.'

After studying the targets in and around Ploesti, it was Brereton who had decided on the low-level mission. His assessment, 'We expect our losses to be 50 per cent but even if we lose everything we've sent but hit the target, it will be worth it'.

179 Liberators made up the *Tidal Wave* – the formal name of the operation – which set forth from dust-strewn desert air bases around Benghazi starting at 0400 on 1 August 1943. Those from the Eighth Air Force retained their olive-drab colours, while those belonging to the Ninth wore sand-coloured camouflage. 'Eight Balls', 'Traveling Circus', 'Sky Scorpions', 'Liberandos' and 'Pyramiders' all vaulted skyward, at last putting to work all of that low-level training.

One aircraft crashed on take-off. One flew into the sea. The lead aircraft was attacked by a Messerschmitt Bf 109, jettisoned its bombs early, and crashed, and no fewer than ten Liberators had to abort and return to base, their engines fouled by the persistent sand.

The strike force was to head north to Corfu, then swing to the north-east. At Corfu, *WONGO-WONGO* (B-24D-120-CO 42-40563 of the 512th BS/376th BG), piloted by 1Lt Brian Flavelle, inexplicably began pitching violently. The Liberator stood abruptly on its tail in mid-air. It shuddered, then dived suddenly straight into the sea. Radio silence was being observed and no one knew what had happened. *WONGO-WONGO's* wingman went down to investigate, found no sign of survivors, and ultimately had to abort and return to North Africa, carrying the deputy mission navigator.

Contrary to myth, *WONGO-WONGO* was not carrying the lead navigator. Still, there was massive confusion en route. On approach to the target, the 376th BG mistook the IP (initial point) at Floresti and turned south too soon. The 93rd BG followed but, thanks to second-thinking and prompt action by pilot Lt Col Addison Baker and co-pilot Maj John L Jerstad in *HELL'S WENCH* (B-24D-120-CO 42-40994 of the 328th BS), the group made another turn which took the group back in the direction of Ploesti. Among the trailing groups, the 389th flew north-east toward its target at Campina, 17 miles (27 km) north of the main refinery. Some confusion persisted as the 44th and 98th BGs pressed on, but both reached the correct IP at Floresti and proceeded to their assigned targets.

Over the target, navigational mix-ups caused some of the refineries to be attacked by too many Liberators, and others by two few. Dodging fighters and flak, many of the bombers flew into cables raised as barriers in their path by balloons.

Flying at low-level in gusting turbulence, confronting enemy fighters and gunfire, no one could doubt the courage of Liberator crews who went against Ploesti, but decades later one of them would virtually foam at the mouth when the mission was included in a book about famous military blunders. In war, success requires risk. The Ploesti attackers were going into nothing less than a fiery furnace.

## HEROIC ACTIONS

In the midst of the inferno, the B-24 Liberator crews displayed incredible heroism. Hit by an 88-mm shell and several mortar rounds, Baker and Jerstad in *HELL'S WENCH* could have belly-landed in an open field but rushed at Ploesti's smoke stacks instead, trailing flames. 389th BG boss Col Leon Johnson lost nine aircraft from a sixteen-aeroplane formation – his share even worse than Brereton had predicted – but pressed his attack despite a sheer wall of German gunfire.

A few Liberator crew members had undergone an unexpected change of assignment before the mission. 2Lt Deane Cavit, a co-pilot, had travelled to North Africa with the 567th BS/389th BG, only to be told that he and his crew were transferring to the 343rd BS/98th BG.

Cavit believes that about a dozen crews were so affected, but that most came from the 'Eight Balls' or the 'Circus', rather than the 'Sky Scorpions'. If so, he may be one of the very few Eighth Air Force Liberator crew member who never flew a mission in the Eighth Air Force. 'Our element started out with eight aircraft', he remembers. 'Five of them reached the target and all five were shot down. Only two of us got out of my plane'. Cavit was one of 110 men who survived bailouts over the Ploesti area, most of whom spent 13 months in a prison camp in Romania and were then liberated by friendly troops.

Despite potent defences and heavy losses, the Ploesti bombing succeeded in inflicting damage on major portions of the Romanian oil fields, although some of the intended targets escaped unscathed.

Liberators fought sluggishly through those demented skies over Romania and struggled to make it home. One sign of the level of difficulty of this mission – the number of people killed on the ground was apparently no greater than the number who died in the air.

## PLOESTI NUMBERS

The final results showed that 179 Liberators took off, 14 aborted and 165 attacked. Of the B-24 losses, 33 were to flak and 10 were to fighters. Fifty-six Liberators were damaged and eight aircraft recovered in Turkey. Of those B-24s which returned to North Africa, 99 recovered at their originating bases while the remaining 15 landed elsewhere. No fewer than 532 aviators died.

It would forever be debated how these bombings affected Germany's ability to fuel its combat forces, but no one doubted that a mighty blow had been dealt to the Reich. Baker, Jerstad, Johnson and 2Lt Lloyd H Hughes, the pilot of B-24D 42-40753 (564th BS/389th BG) were awarded the Medal of Honor, all but Leon Johnson posthumously. A fifth Medal of Honor went to a Ninth Air Force member, Col Kane.

After Ploesti, the 'detached' Liberator groups from the Eighth flew four post-*Husky* missions, to Wiener Neustadt on 13 August 1943, to Foggia, in Italy, on 16 and 18 August 1943 and to the Cancello depot and marshalling yards on 21 August 1943. During their sojourn in the Mediterranean, the Eighth groups launched 990 sorties and lost 54 bombers. Their gunners claimed 121 enemy aircraft destroyed. About 35 men were killed in action and many others wounded or captured. The Eighth Air Force's Liberators were still completing their North African stay on 17 August 1943 when B-17 Flying Fortresses from bases in England flew the famous Schweinfurt-Regensburg mission in which 60 heavy bombers were lost.

## AUTUMN 1943

For months to come, Ploesti would stand as the high water mark for Liberator operations in Europe. Indeed, early sorties over the continent had produced mixed results at best, and there was grounds to believe that German defences would grow stronger, not weaken.

The Messerschmitt Bf 109 (which Americans always called the 'ME 109') and the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 were now painfully familiar to Liberator crews, as were the much-respected German 88-mm anti-aircraft guns or flak, which comes from the German word for aircraft defence gun, *fliegerabwherkanone.*

As the war progressed, the Germans would begin to encircle crucial targets with as many as 40 heavy guns of various calibres in what they called a *grossbatterie*, creating two rings of these monster weapons, and using radar to learn when the bombers were coming.

## HEAVY TOLL

Despite potent defences and heavy losses, the Ploesti bombing inflicted heavy damage on the Romanian oil fields. Today, the 532 American flyers who died on the raid are recalled in small and large ways, including a street named for Jerstad at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska.

It will forever be debated how these bombings affected Germany's ability to fuel its combat forces, but no one doubted that the Third Reich was dealt a heavy blow by courageous American crews. Baker, Jerstad, Johnson, Kane and Hughes were awarded the Medal of Honor, all but Johnson and Kane posthumously. It was the only raid in history for which five Americans received their nation's highest award for valour.

Soon, the Fifteenth Air Force would be part of the fight – not on a single mission, but as the bulwark of a massive air campaign that would grow for months, until it reached the point where several huge missions could be mounted on a single day. And for every one of the Fifteenth's days of existence, Liberator crews would look back at the sole low-level raid on Ploesti and see in it lessons to learn and mistakes to ignore. Ploesti was the last time Liberators went into Romania flying lower than the trees.

# 1943

The Fifteenth Air Force was activated on 1 November 1943, mid-way through the Allies' North African campaign, with its headquarters at Tunis. The first commander was Maj Gen James H Doolittle, well-known as an air racing pilot of the 1930s and as the leader of the B-25 Mitchell raid on Tokyo the previous year, for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. Doolittle was to be one of only two commanders of the Fifteenth throughout the war, the other being Maj Gen Nathan F Twining, himself a future Air Force chief of staff.

Starting with its first mission on 2 November 1943 to the Messerschmitt assembly plant at Wiener Neustadt and finishing with its attack on the Salzburg main marshalling yard on 1 May 1945, the Fifteenth bore the brunt of an especially difficult campaign. Twining said at the end of the war, 'The cost to us, in both men and materiel, has not been small, but with that indomitable American spirit and know-how, we have surmounted all obstacles to accomplish our mission'.

The Fifteenth was organised for the purpose of completing the strategic encirclement of Germany and its satellites. Striking at Axis

**This map, classified CONFIDENTIAL at the time, was made by the 456th BG at the end of the war to be used in briefings. It illustrates how Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers operating from Italy's Foggia plain were able to reach out and assault targets in the Third Reich, some of which were out of range of the Eighth Air Force in England (*Joe Shuster via Robert F Dorr*)**

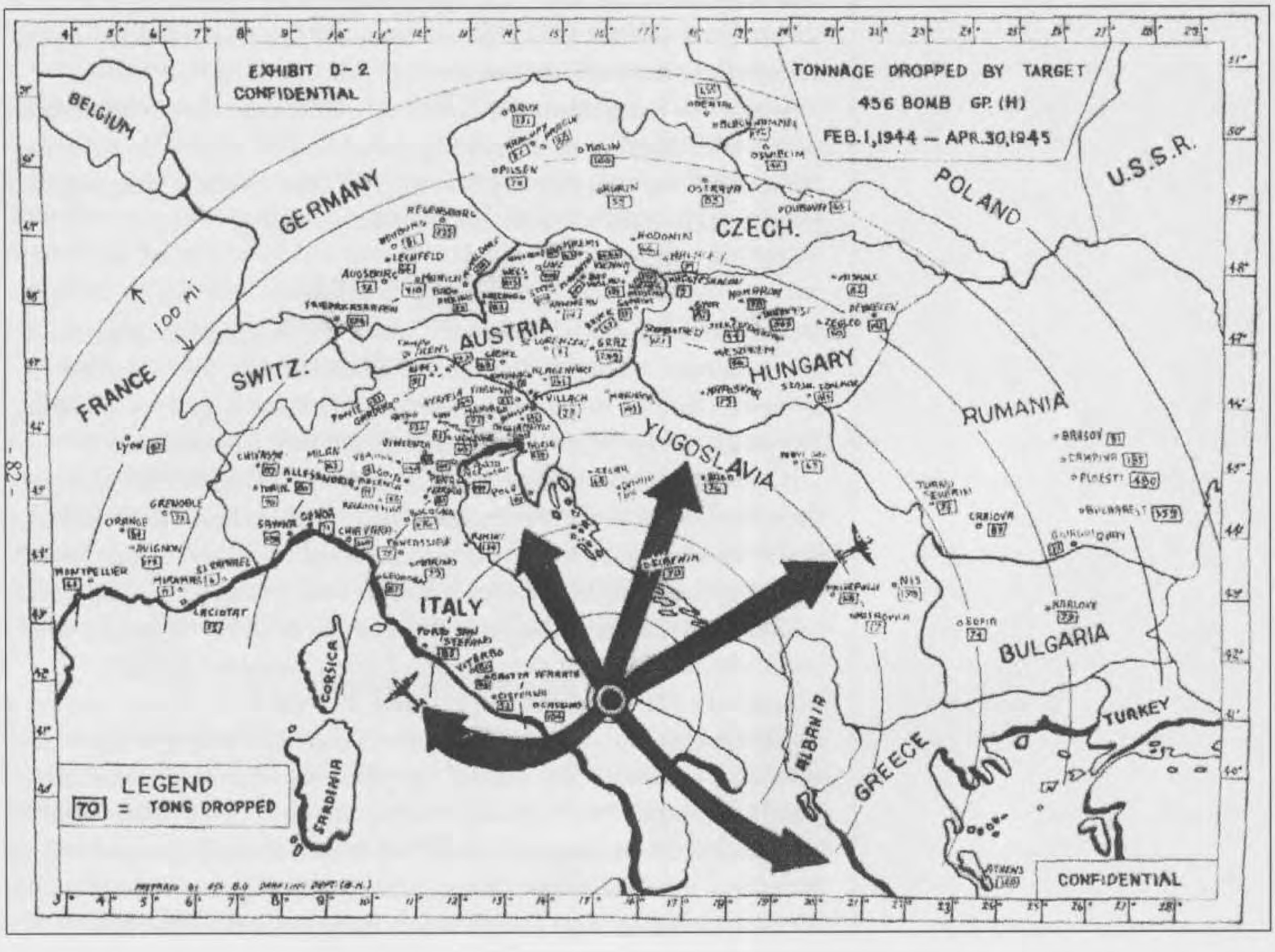


EXHIBIT D-2
CONFIDENTIAL
TONNAGE DROPPED BY TARGET
456 BOMB GP. (H)
FEB.1,1944 – APR.30,1945
BELGIUM
GERMANY
CZECH.
POLAND
U.S.S.R.
FRANCE
SWITZ.
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
RUMANIA
YUGOSLAVIA
ITALY
CORSICA
SARDINIA
ALBANIA
GREECE
BULGARIA
TURKEY
100 mi
LEGEND
70 = TONS DROPPED
CONFIDENTIAL
- 82 -

targets from the south, it would fill a gap that left every German installation vulnerable to possible air attack. For B-24 Liberator crewmen, this would mean learning new place names, many of them in the Balkans.

The primary mission of the Fifteenth within its operating range was the destruction of the Luftwaffe. Thereafter, the main weight of the Fifteenth's air effort was to be unleashed on Axis oil refineries and oil supply installation. And although Ploesti would never be struck from low-level again, the most famous of the Reich's refinery centres would become a familiar target from high altitude. Finally, the Fifteenth's last accomplishment would be the destruction of the German ball bearing industry and other centres of vital military production.

**This B-24J of the 779th BS/464th BG was photographed crossing the Alps after taking off from Panatela Army Air Field, at Canosa di Puglia. The bomber was participating in a CBO mission (*Jo Ann Breckenridge*)**

## FOUR CAMPAIGNS

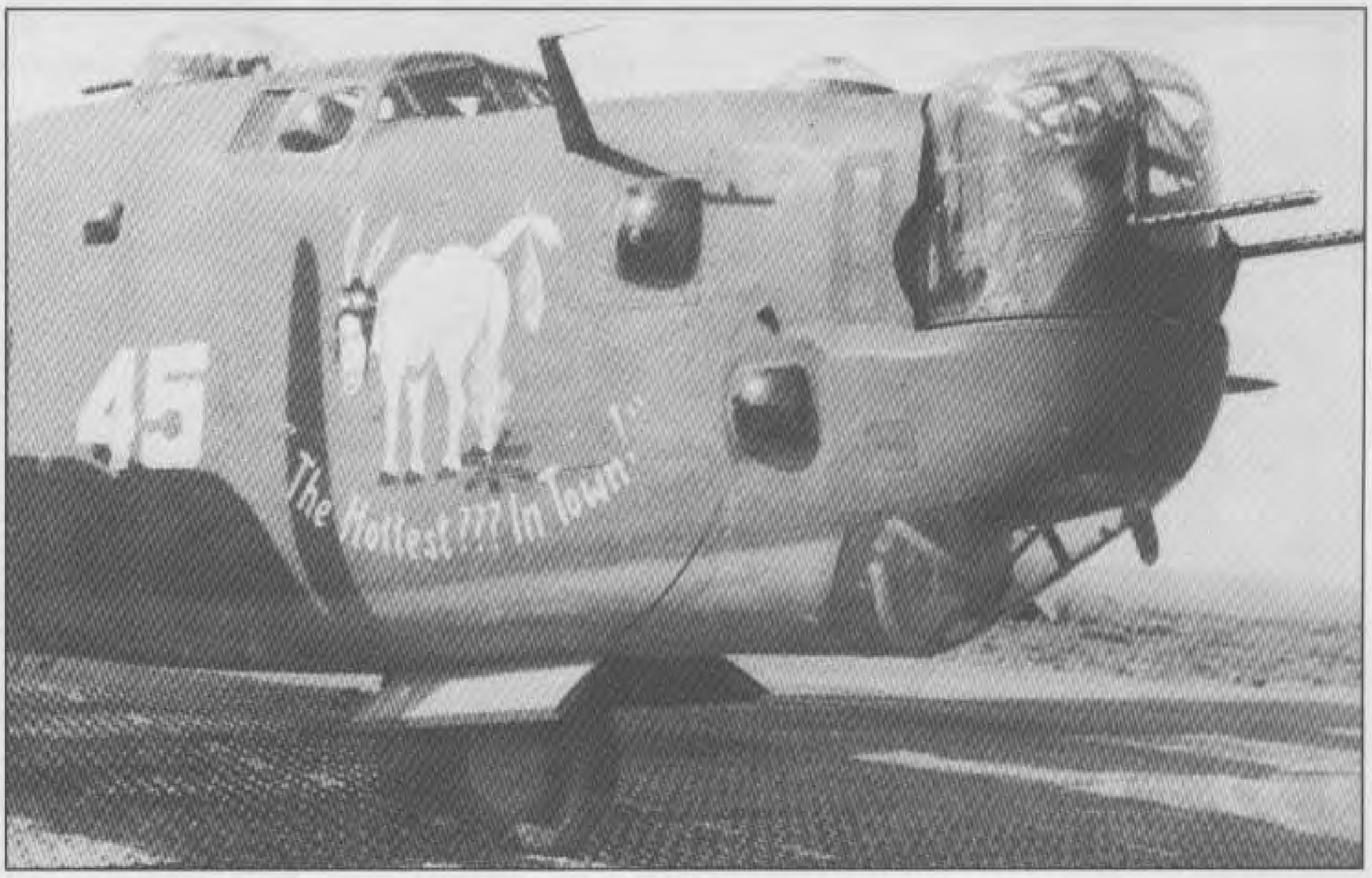
As it turned out, however, the Fifteenth Air Force accomplished more than its creators ever expected. A document written at the end of the war, although rife with the embellishments of the era, gives a good picture of this numbered air force's achievements, which were accomplished primarily with the B-24 Liberator;

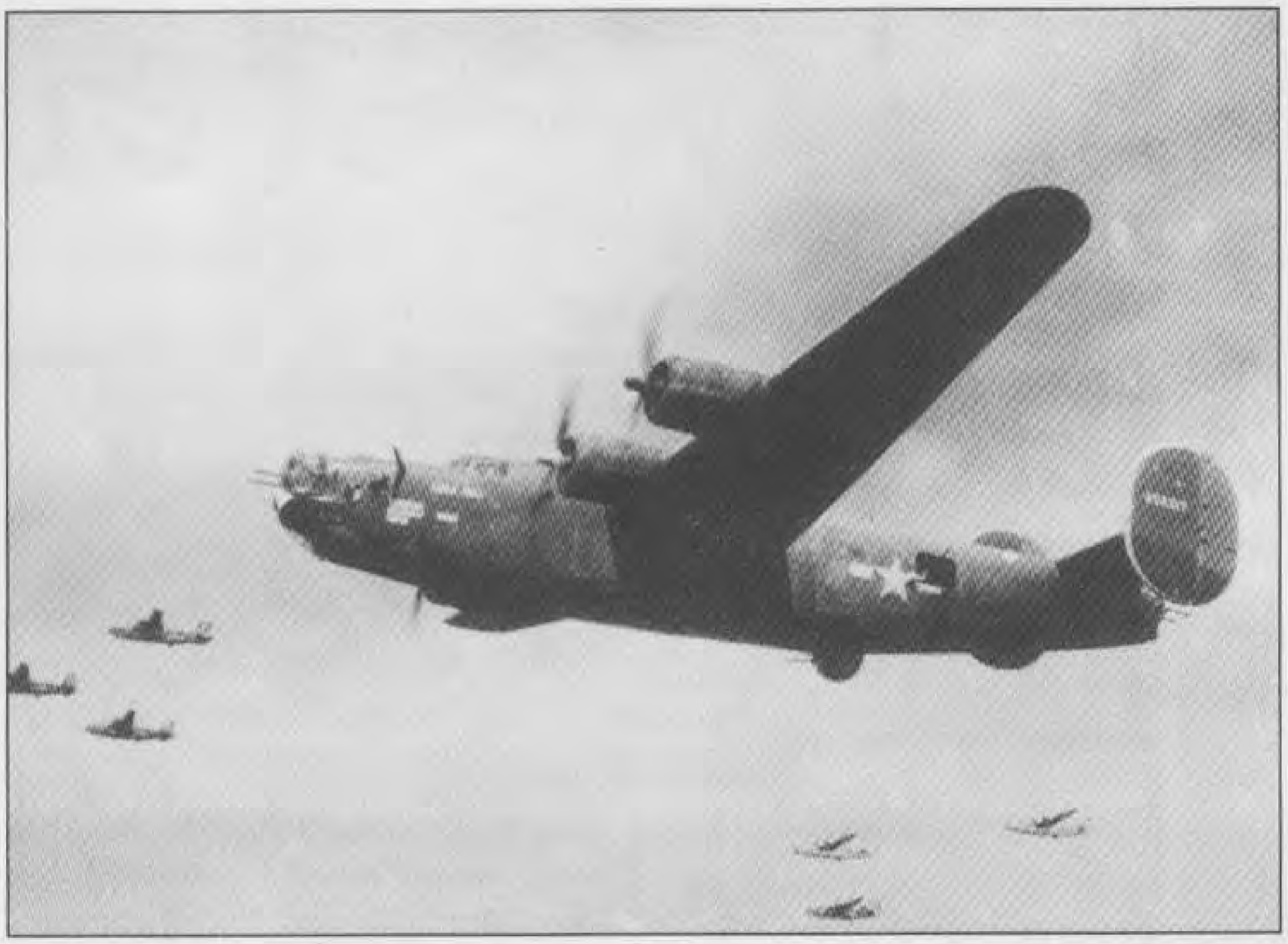
'The 15th (wartime documents often eschew correct usage, which is Fifteenth) fought four broad campaigns: against enemy oil, enemy air force, enemy communications and enemy ground forces. Most vital of the 15th's oil targets was the Ploesti complex of refineries, which contributed about 30 per cent of the entire Axis oil supply, and an equal amount of gasoline. Ploesti was protected by 150 first class fighters and 250 heavy flak guns when the 15th, with the co-operation of the RAF 205th Group of night bombers, began a series of attacks against it on 5 April (1944). The campaign continued until 19 August (1944).

'15th and RAF bombers flew 5287 sorties, dropping 12,870 tons of bombs. The cost was 237 heavies (15 of them RAF), 10 P-38 dive-bombers and 39 escorting fighters. More than 2200 American airmen were lost. But results were good. At the end of the campaign the refineries were reduced to only 10 per cent of their normal rate of activity, and during the entire period from April to August the average production rate was reduced by 60 per cent.

'The 15th followed up the Ploesti attacks by dropping 10,000 tons of bombs in attacks on three

**When the Fifteenth Air Force set up shop on 1 November 1943, its Liberators wore the familiar olive-drab paint scheme and quickly developed nose-art. *"The Hottest ??? In Town!"* was a B-24H-10-CF (41-29313) of the 766th BS/461st BG. Note the pierced steel planking (alias Marston mat) which became the familiar surface for parking aprons at some Italian bases (*Rob Hoskins*)**





Reflecting the subdued appearance and olive-drab cover of early Fifteenth Air Force warriors, the bomber in the foreground is Ford-built B-24-H-15-FO Liberator 42-52317, christened *LEILA BELL*, of the 759th BS/459th BG (*AAF via Robert F Dorr*)

synthetic oil plants in Silesia and one in Poland, reducing their combined production by February of 1945 to 20 per cent of what it was in June of 1944.

'By devastating attacks on Wiener Neustadt and Regensburg, two of the three main enemy fighter manufacturing complexes, the 15th helped materially in the attainment of European air supremacy. By May 1944, estimated actual production stood at 250 aircraft a month within range of the 15th against a contemplated production of 650 aircraft per month.

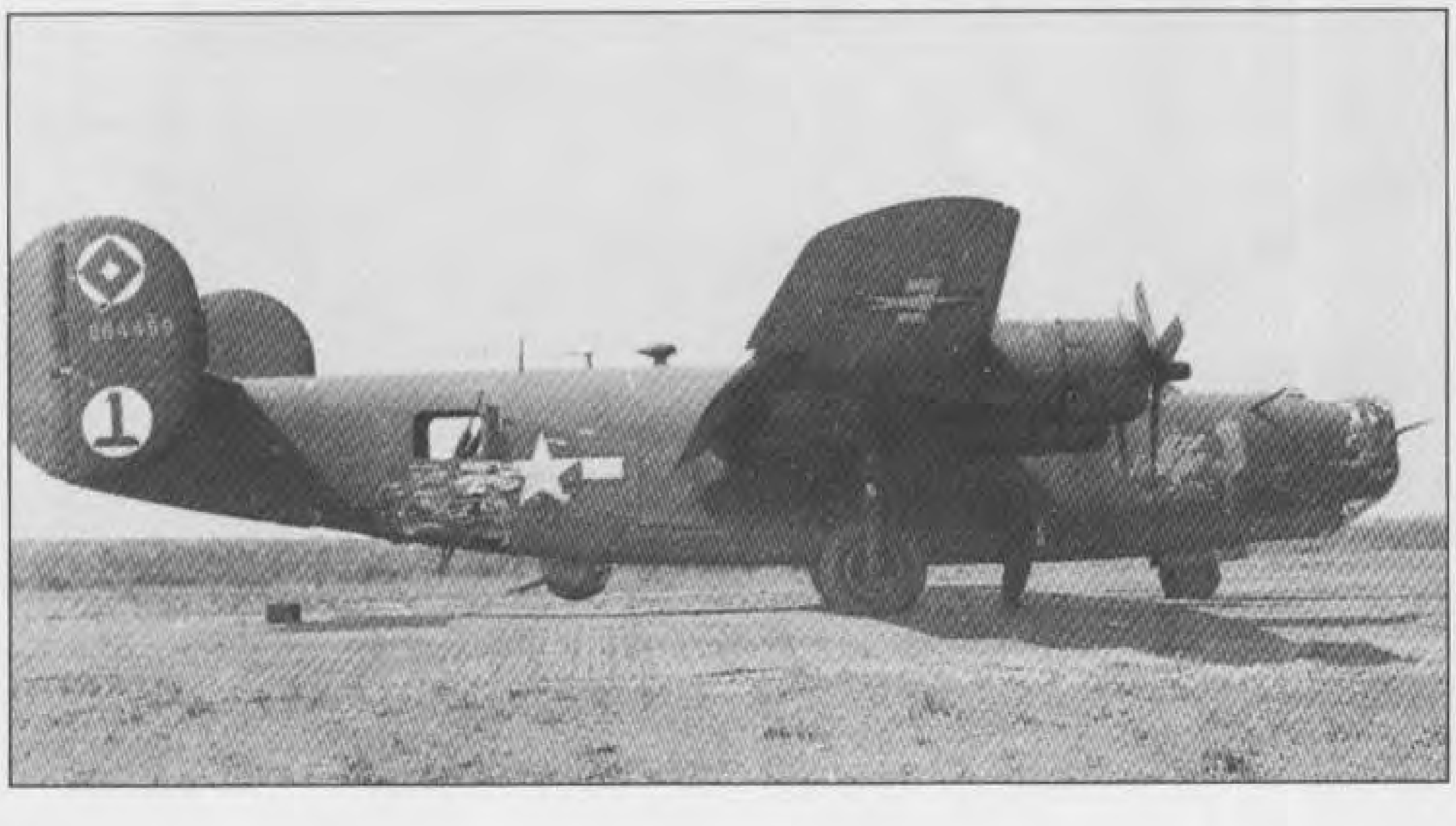
'Through the counter-air force and oil campaigns, the 15th was also attacking enemy communications and transportation systems far behind the front lines, disrupting supply movements from industrial centres over an 800-mile (1287 km) radius from the Italian airfields.

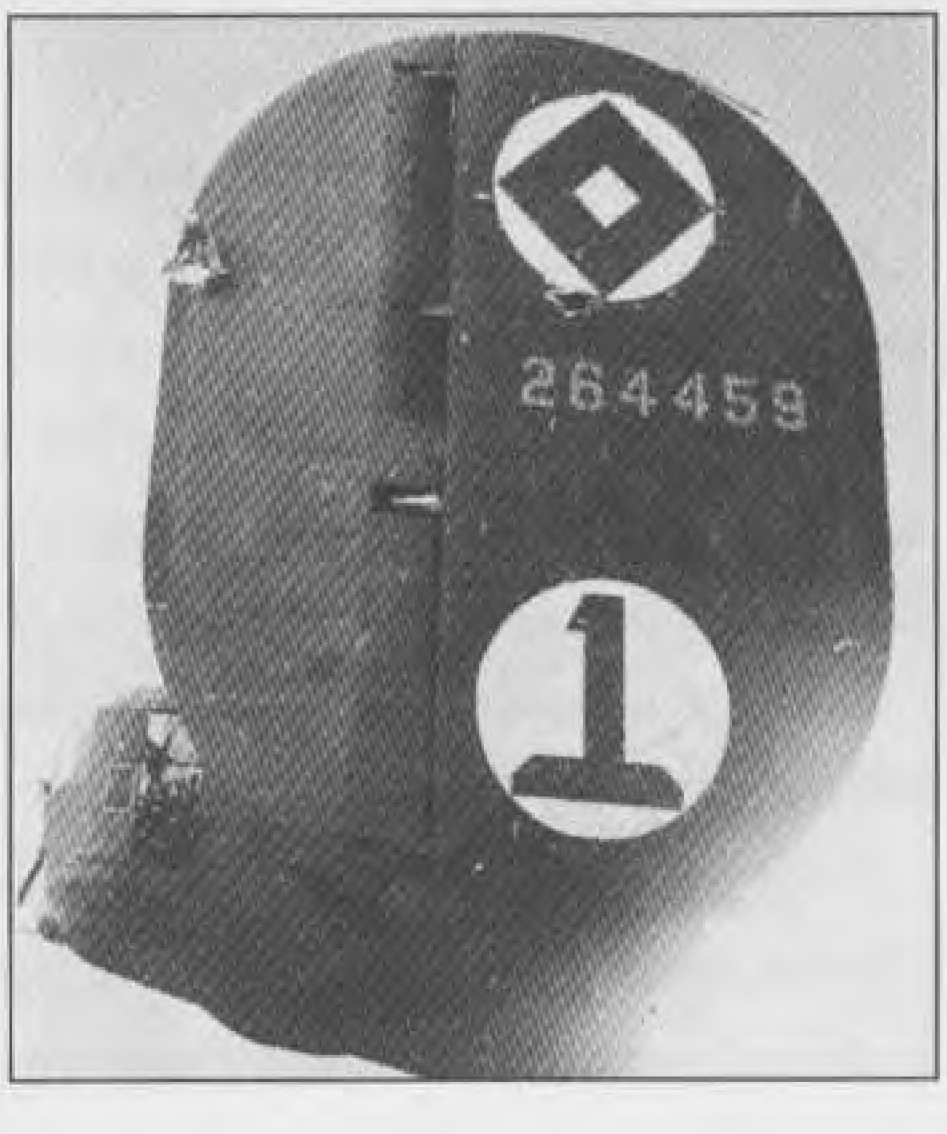
'The 15th also supplied Allied Army co-operation bombing targets at Salerno, Anzio, and Cassino in the Rome campaign. On April 15, 1945 the 15th put up a record-smashing 93 per cent of its available aircraft to soften up the approaches to Bologna in one of the final missions of the Italian campaign.

'A unique sidelight of the 15th's operations has been the rescue and repatriation of air crews shot down in enemy territory. No other air force has undertaken escape operations in so many countries. The 15th has returned 5650 personnel by air, surface vessel and on foot through enemy lines. In more than 300 planned "reunion" operations, men have been brought back safely from Tunisia, Italy, France, Switzerland, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Austria and Germany.'

At the height of its strength, the Fifteenth Air Force had 21 heavy bomb groups, 15 with B-24 Liberators and six with B-17 Flying Fortresses. This force totalled 1427 four-engined bombers. The Fifteenth also had four medium bomber groups and, altogether, 1810

**Below and right below**
Liberators of the Fifteenth Air Force had the most arcane, and inconsistent, tail markings of bombers in any theatre. B-24H-10-CF Liberator 42-64459 *SLIP STREAM* belonged to the 454th BG and sustained battle damage on the rudder and fin, including a hole just above the radio call number (the 'tail number') of the aircraft. The full view of the entire aircraft also shows damage beneath the starboard waist gun position (*AAF via William N Hess*)





bomber crews, including those who flew medium B-25 Mitchells and B-26 Marauders. With seven fighter and two reconnaissance groups capping off its order of battle, the Fifteenth Air Force had 62,180 ground personnel.

## EARLY BUILD-UP

The event that made the Fifteenth Air Force possible was the Allies' inept, but relentless, advance in southern Italy. The previous month (October 1943), the Allied troops pushing up the east coast of Italy captured the vital Foggia plain – a flat, almost featureless and mosquito-infested plateau which forms the 'spur' on the 'boot' of Italy. This was a critical gain, for the Foggia plain was strewn with a ready infrastructure of existing airfields. Airfield construction battalions of the AAF and the RAF were pressed into service to create more, scraping runways out of olive groves, then covering them with gravel and PSP (Pierced Steel Planking) in order to create runways and taxyways, perimeter tracks and hardstands.

**Thirteen Liberators from the 485th BG cruise over the Adriatic Sea, en route to their target. Bomb groups and even individual squadrons were inconsistent about the use of the ball turret, which is illustrated here to distinct advantage. Contrary to myth, the ball was not a death trap, but its usefulness – as measured against its weight and drag – was a fount of persistent debate. Most crews simply wanted as many guns in as many places as possible. This sun-splashed portrait of B-24s going to war is deceptive. Much of the time, the weather in the Fifteenth Air Force AOR (area of responsibility) was horrendous. Even when they broke into sunlight after slipping the surly bonds, Liberator crews often found themselves above weather that confounded their targeting efforts but, somehow, never seemed to prevent the Luftwaffe from coming after them (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

The newly-available Italian airfields, which boasted fighters and heavy bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force, B-25 Mitchell medium bombers of the Twelfth Air Force and Wellingtons of the RAF's No 205 Group, placed all of Occupied Europe within reach of Allied bombers, and opened a second front in the air war, subjecting the Third Reich to assault from both England and Italy. The importance of the Italian theatre is rarely celebrated, but this was a turning point in the air war.

A document from a nearby RAF Wellington squadron describes Foggia, and could have been written by a Liberator crew member;

'Living conditions at Foggia were brutal, especially in the winter. With the exception of a few farm buildings that served as administrative buildings and officers' messes, most of the crews and ground staff slept in tents, well-worn from the desert campaign. Heat came from jury-rigged oil stoves fuelled with used oil from the engine sumps of the "Wimpies" (Wellington bombers). Many tent fires can be traced to the explosive combination of oil, water and flame.

'Food was basic – bully beef, hardtack and well stewed tea, with locally bartered eggs and local vino. Beds were made from bomb fin cases and whatever else could be scavenged. Parachutes served as pillows and flight jackets became blankets. Many crews report that their 'chutes were never checked or re-packed during their entire tour. Entertainment was either self-made or provided by travelling ENSA or USO troupes. Dysentery and malaria were rampant. Leave was taken at the beaches of Manfredonia or at Bari. This was definitely not the "Brylcreem boy" image of our Air Force!'

The newly-formed Mediterranean force already had a history and a tradition. B-24 Liberators of the predecessor organisation had attacked

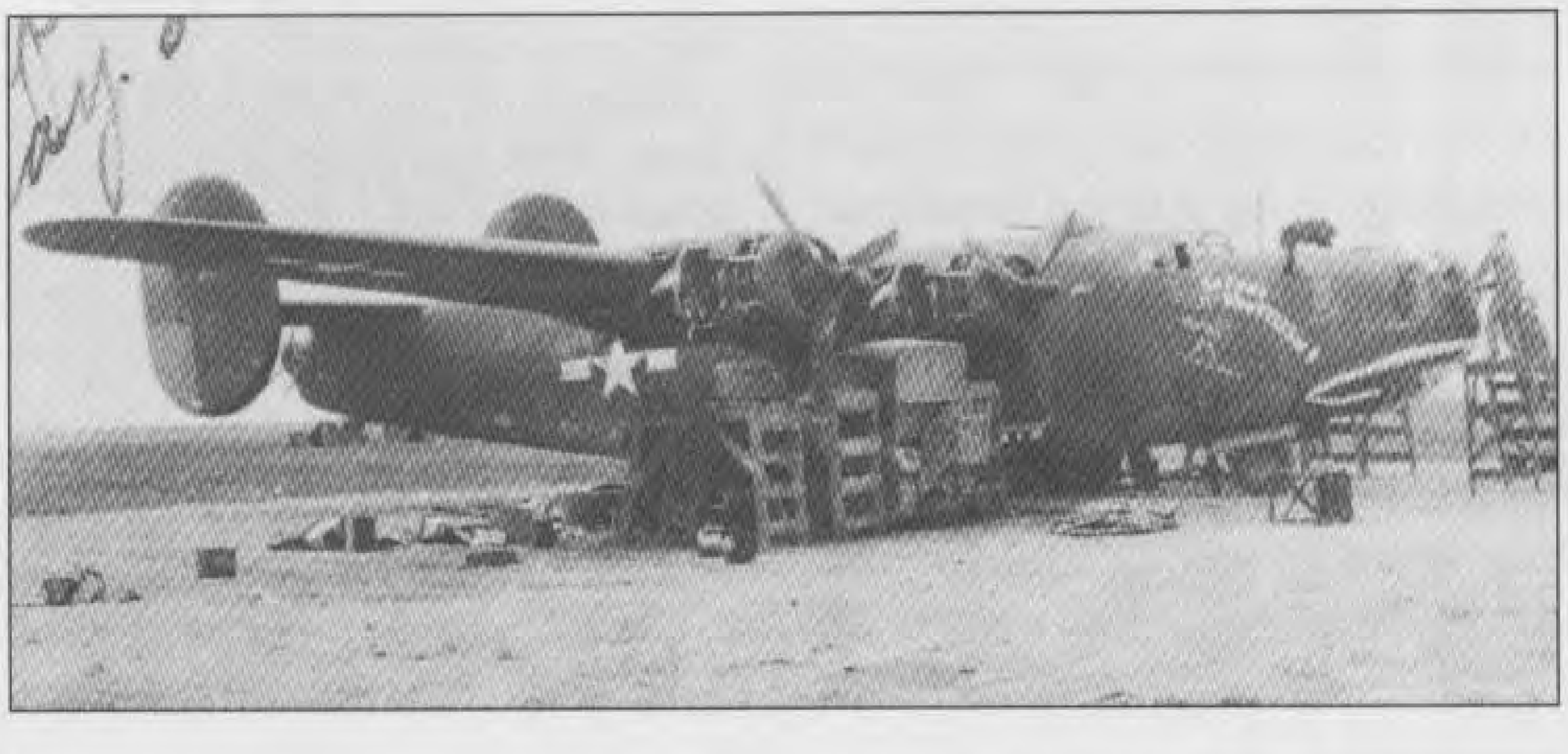
German oil refineries in Ploesti on 1 August 1943 in a dramatic, low-level strike that sustained enormous casualties and resulted in four awards of the Medal of Honor. The Fifteenth inherited six heavy bomb groups in all, four equipped with the B-17 Flying Fortress and two operating the appreciably faster, longer-legged B-24 Liberator. The newly-formed Fifteenth also included fighter and reconnaissance assets.

**Every crew had a photo that looked like this, but this particular one is a fake. No Fifteenth Air Force bomber was really named *OMAHA ANN*, at least not for more than a few minutes. Ann Hagerty of Omaha, Nebraska, had written a 'Dear John' letter breaking her engagement with a soldier named Paul Wagner. The letter was delivered in error to the wrong Paul Wagner, a captain and navigator with the 767th BS/461st BG at Torreto. Squadronmates slapped the temporary name on this B-24H-15-FO Liberator (42-52378) in a vain effort to sell their own Paul Wagner as a replacement for the jilted man with the same name. The words *OMAHA ANN* were removed after the picture was taken. Fifty years later at a reunion in Omaha, a crew member from 42-52378 sought in vain to locate the woman whose wrongly-delivered letter had inspired this prank (*Walt Robinson via Rob Hoskins*)**

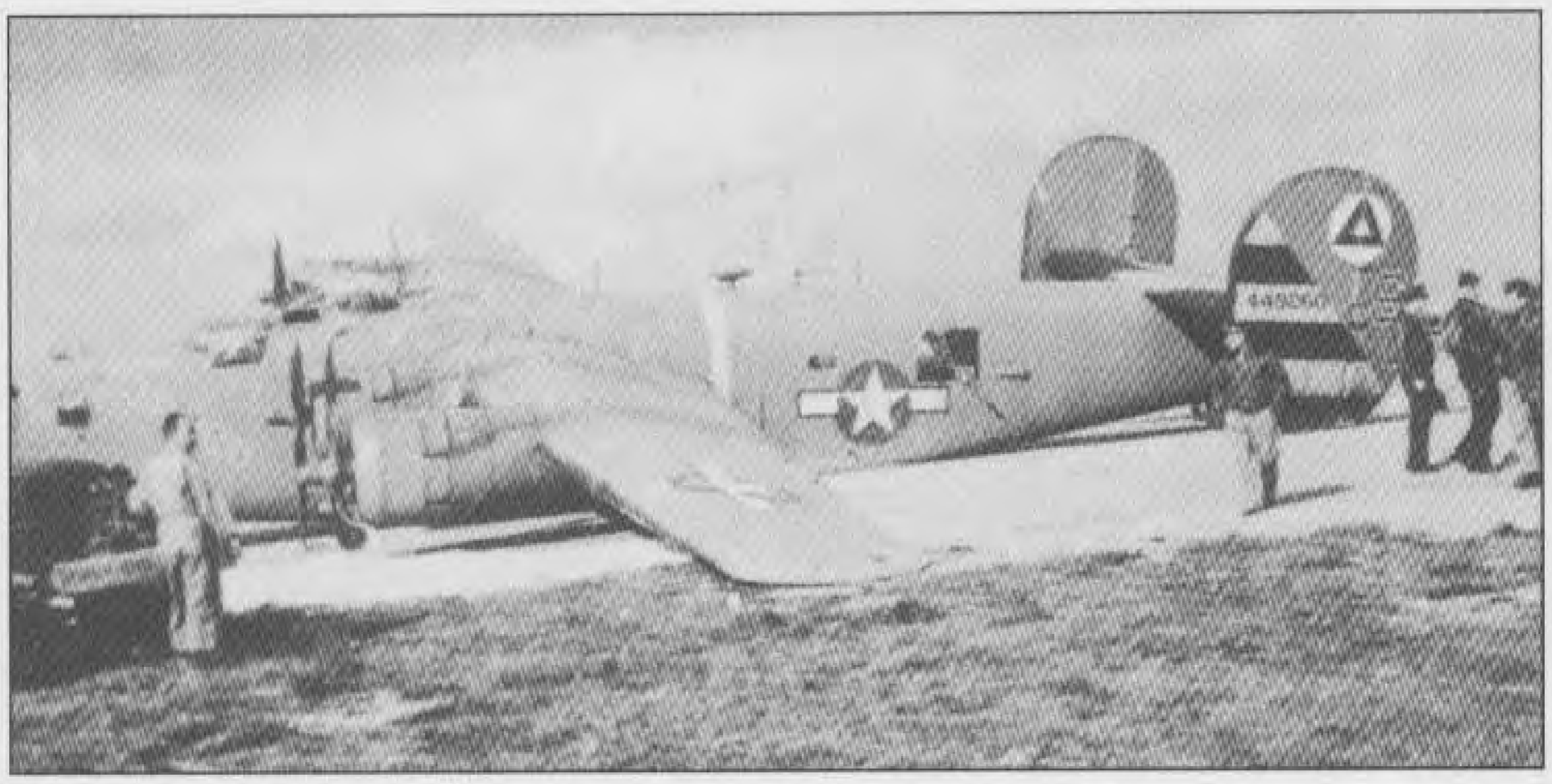
## 47th BOMB WING

Soon after its formation, the Fifteenth also acquired the 47th Bomb Wing (BW) which started out as the parent headquarters for the two existing Liberator groups (98th and 376th BGs), and eventually acquired two more (449th 'Flying Horsemen' and 450th BGs). The 47th BW flag was unfurled at Manduria in the 'heel' of the Italian 'boot' below Taranto on 11 November 1943, and the wing began combat operations on 24 November. The two veteran bomb groups moved north from their established bases in Tunisia, the 376th BG 'Liberandos' setting up shop at San Pancrazio and the 98th BG 'Pyramiders' at Brindisi. The nomadic 98th BG moved to Manduria soon afterward, and then to a permanent location at Lecce.

At the formation of the Fifteenth Air Force, the plan was to mount a second heavy-bomber offensive from the MTO using up to 15 additional heavy bomb groups. Before the end of the year, the new



**When the Fifteenth Air Force was formed in November 1943, everybody knew that maintenance conditions would be primitive and difficult *SATAN'S SHUTTLEBUS* was a Douglas-assembled B-24H-15-DT (41-28802) of the 756th BS/459th BG, based at Giulia Field near Cerignola, Italy. These maintenance men are using crates in place of scaffolds to perform outdoor engine overhauls (*459th BG Association*)**



**The 98th BG was on the scene before the Fifteenth Air Force was formed, and remained part of the effort against the Axis until war's end. Aircraft frequently came to earth in unexpected ways, and fire-fighters did not have the foam that is used to ease a difficult let-down today. This overall grey-blue Ford-built B-24L-5-FO Liberator (44-49260 *LIL' BLON-DEE*) appears to have suffered a left main gear failure on landing at the 98th BG's Marcianise base (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

numbered air force was to begin receiving elements of the 449th, 450th, 451st, 454th, 455th and 456th BGs, each with four flying squadrons of 15 or 16 B-24H Liberators apiece.

When the Fifteenth Air Force took over heavy bomber groups that had previously belonged to the Twelfth Air Force, the two B-24 Liberator outfits that were transferred in had their aircraft still attired in the unit markings they had adopted while serving in the Ninth Air Force. Both groups had chosen not to change them during their brief spell with the Twelfth, the 98th BG using letters and the 376th BG 'battle numbers' on the outer fins and sides of the nose. All of the bombers were camouflaged in standard olive-drab finish.

## WIENER NEUSTADT

After B-17s drew the distinction of completing the first heavy bomber strike by the Fifteenth Air Force, on 2 November 1943 a force of 74 B-17s and 38 B-24s set forth from bases in Italy to assault the Messerschmitt fighter plant at Wiener Neustadt, in Germany. This mission marked the debut of the B-24 Liberator in combat with the Fifteenth Air Force, although not all of the bombers involved took off from bases in Italy. As one Liberator crew member, Ben Konsynski (513th BS/376th BG), later remembered;

'We flew the 2 November 1943 attack from Enfidaville, in Africa, in aeroplane #42, which was the B-24 we had brought over from the states. On the way to the target we lost three superchargers and couldn't stay with the formation, but continued to the target and dropped our bombs. Since we were not in formation, and were being continually attacked by ME 109s, every crew member was busy either shooting or reporting what was happening in out vicinity. We saw several B-17s being picked off when they were out of formation and expected the same to happen to us. No one in our aeroplane reported a parachute. They reported '109s latching onto us.

'By running the engines at full throttle and descending from the target we picked up speed, still under attack. We caught our formation and were going so fast we flew right through it and out in front, so we had to cut the throttles all the way back to get back into the formation. The '109s continued to attack the whole formation. We made an emergency landing in Bari, Italy on a 4000 ft (1219 m) runway with one application of brakes. We had to cut back one, two and three engines and baby number four in order to make the turn at the end of the runway.

'Our left rudder was completely shredded, we had flak fragments in our right tyre and the British mechanics who worked on the aeroplane reported we had 181 holes in it mostly from '109s. Not one of our crew was hit, but on later missions my co-pilot, navigator and bombardier all received the Purple Heart (the medal given to those wounded in action).'

A 4000-ft (1219-m) airstrip may sound sufficient, but runways for four-engined bombers both in the USA and overseas were always 6000 ft (1828 m) long. As Konsynski put it;

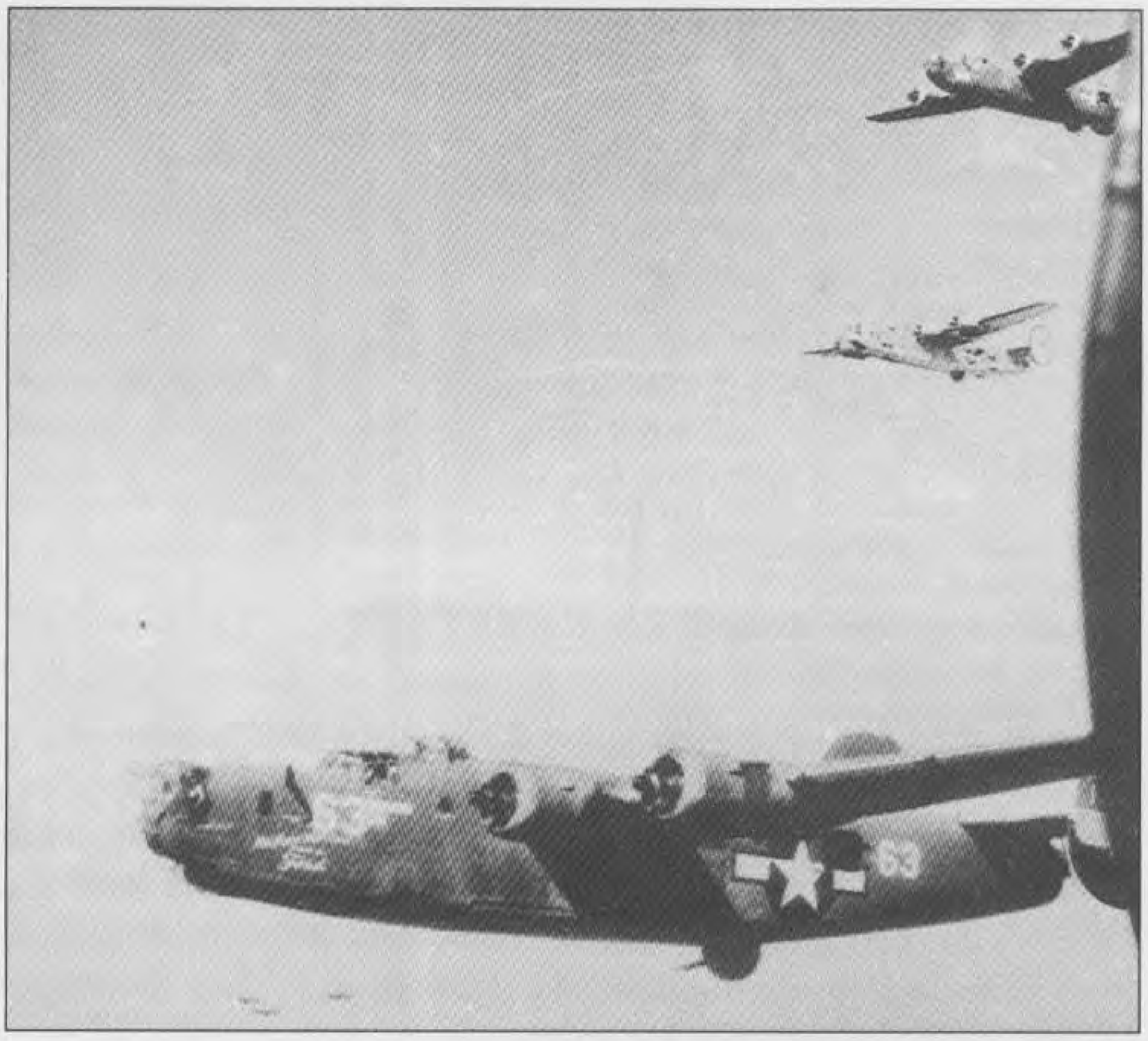
'A healthy crew with a healthy aeroplane could easily land within 4000 ft (1219 m). Taking off with a full load of fuel and bombs

**The first of two wartime commanders of the 459th BG, 40-year-old Col Marden M Munn led the group from its activation in the USA on 1 July 1943 until 17 August 1944, when command was transferred to Col Henry K Mooney, and Munn returned home (*459th BG Association*)**

**Lt Gen James Doolittle (left) confers with Army Air Forces chief Gen Henry H 'Hap' Arnold. Already recommended for the Medal of Honor for his April 1942 B-25 Mitchell raid on Tokyo, Doolittle commanded the Fifteenth Air Force only briefly. He was not fond of the B-24 Liberator, and his successor Maj Gen Nathan F Twining, seemed more at home with both the Fifteenth and the B-24 (*via Norman Taylor*)**

required more space, and in a group take-off aeroplanes after the first were climbing in turbulent air. Nothing was healthy during that landing. My hydraulic system was shot out and my vertical contra surfaces were shot up, making a landing more difficult. And at that particular strip the Italians had erected a concrete block building at the end of the runway. Very exciting, under the circumstances.'

The fledgling Wiener Neustadt mission proved that Germany's aircraft industry was vulnerable to attack from the air, and seemed to vindicate those who had pushed to get the Fifteenth's bombers into the fray quickly. 74 B-17s and 38 B-24s reached the target and dropped 654,000 lbs (296650 kg) of bombs with results that were deemed impressive. The attack destroyed a large aircraft assembly shop and damaged another, wiped out two hangars and cratered runways and taxyways. Fifteenth officials later claimed that the raid deprived the Luftwaffe of 250 fighters per month for two months, which was almost certainly an exaggeration. Losses were six B-17s and five B-24s, with the Americans claiming to have shot down 56 Luftwaffe fighters.



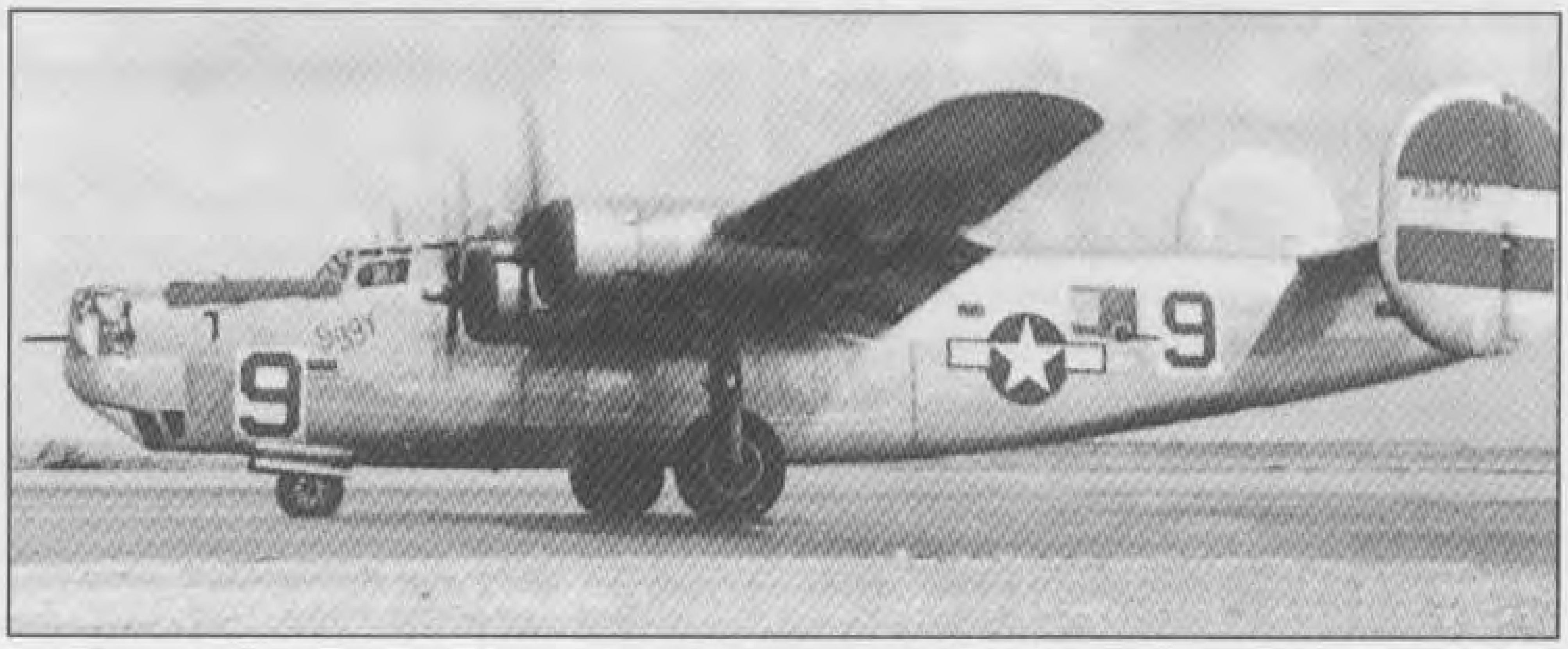
**B-24H-10-DT 41-28670 *Malfunction sired by Ford* (in foreground) was one of two Liberators to wear this name. The 'siring' process involved Ford turning out a knockdown kit which was final-assembled by Douglas. The aircraft belongs to the 767th BS/461st BG. In the background at three o'clock high are aircraft from the 765th BS (*via Rob Hoskins*)**

## EARLY RAIDS

On 9 November 1943, 20 B-24s bombed the Villar Perosa ball bearing factory near Turin. The plant was being operated by the Germans to provide bearings to forces in the Italian theatre, and it was thought that the bomb-carrying capability of the Liberator was ideal for this target, but the results appear to have been negligible. 22 B-24s struck the same target again the following day, and once again the mission appeared to have little or no effect. On 11 November, Liberators bombed another ball bearing facility at Annecy, in France. One bomber was lost and, again, there was negligible impact on the target.

On 24 November 1943, B-24 Liberators escorted by P-38 Lightnings (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 19 - P-38 Lightning Aces of the ETO/MTO* for further details) struck the railroad yards in Sofia, Bulgaria. Because of rapidly deteriorating weather, only 17 Liberators out of 24 reached the target and, even then, had to bomb through overcast. German fighters climbed through the heavy clouds to attack the strike force and two B-24s and a P-38 were shot down, while

**_Iggy_ was a B-24J-5-FO Liberator (42-51606), and was also the aircraft that 461st BG commander Col Frederick Glantzberg flew away in when he left his assignment with the bomb group at Toretta (*via Rob Hoskins*)**



**Italy's Baron Pavoncelli and family with staff members of the 461st BG at Toretta. The baron owned the farm on which the airfield was situated. They are, from left to right, Col Philip Hawes (who took command of the 461st BG when Glantzberg left), the baron's grandson, the baron's daughter-in law, Baron Pavoncelli, 461st BG commander Col Frederick Glantzberg, the baron's son and Lt Caroselli. Caroselli, whose first name seems to be lost to history, was shot down two days after this photo was taken (*via Rob Hoskins*)**

counter-claims were made for four Luftwaffe fighters destroyed, plus two probable kills.

The Fifteenth had been formed to join in the Allied CBO (Combined Bomber Offensive) in Germany. Its Liberator squadrons would be tasked to strike some CBO targets which were also within reach of Eighth Air Force bombers in England (including, eventually, Germany's capital, Berlin), some CBO targets which could not be struck from elsewhere, and some targets which were not considered part of the CBO scheme. To make this happen, the Fifteenth was to witness a build-up of men, materiel, bases and bombers that was unprecedented.

While the Eighth Air Force had built up gradually and was continuing to do so, the Fifteenth was to gain strength almost abruptly. Some aspects of the build-up might have proven more effective with less haste, but underlying the frenetic effort to get the Fifteenth up to fighting strength was the argument that there was a war to be won.

That first month of the Fifteenth's operational life (November 1943) was sufficient to disabuse the numbered air force's leaders of any notion that they had done everything right. For one thing, it had been expected that airbases in Italy would enjoy better weather than those in England – yet the Fifteenth spent most of November socked-in.

Liberator crews quickly learned that they were at the outer edge of the logistics trail that snaked all the way back to the American heartland, and they suffered from spare-parts and maintenance problems which were, if anything, more severe than those in England. A handful of bombing missions in November were flown by Liberator formations that were too small to have any real significance, or were aborted entirely because of weather and mechanical woes.

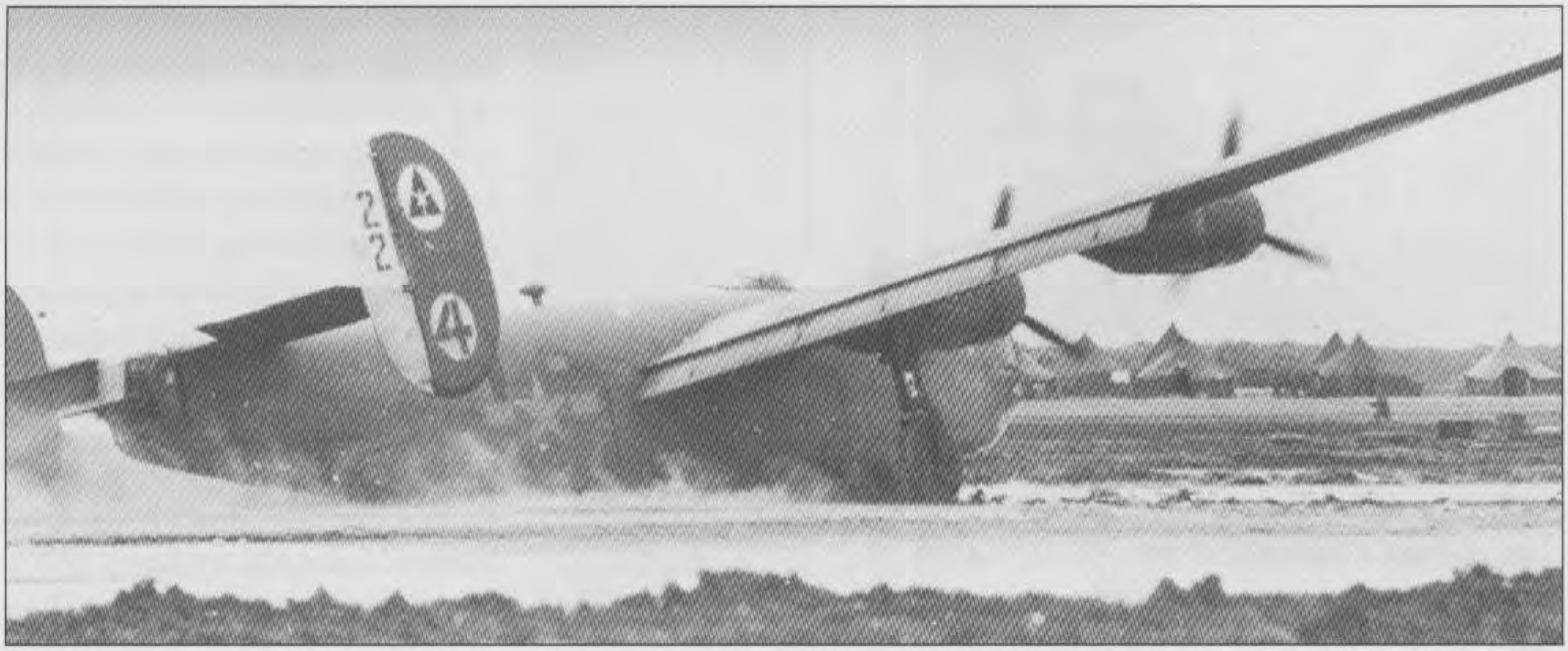
The B-17 was the primary weapon of the Fifteenth at first, but B-24s struck out at Annecy on 11 November (as noted above), at Athens on 15 November, at Sofia on 24 November, at Klagenfurt, in Austria, the following day and again at Klagenfurt on 30 November. P-38s were available to assist during all or part of most of these missions, but Liberator crews still found themselves eyeball-to-eyeball with the Luftwaffe on numerous occasions.

On the 24 November mission, gunners claimed four aerial victories, but two Liberators and a Lightning were lost. Each time a Liberator went down a ten-man crew went with it (eleven men on some specialised missions), and at this juncture in the war the loss in humanity was more painful than the loss of hardware.

## DECEMBER 1943

Beginning in December 1943, Liberators of the 449th BG (716th, 717th, 718th and 719th BSs) bedded down at Grottaglie, Italy, becoming the third group to join the 47th BW in the process.

**Baron Pavoncelli would lend 461st BG commander Col Frederick Glantzberg his fine horses from time to time. Italian peasants working at Toretta addressed the colonel 'Buon giorno, barba rosa', since he was a redhead (*via Rob Hoskins*)**



Fort Worth-built B-24H-5-CF Liberator 41-29212 of the 450th BG crash-lands at Manduria, Italy, following a mission to the Third Reich. The tents in the background illustrate typical living conditions for many Fifteenth Air Force members (*AAF via William N Hess*)

Grottaglie is located just inside the 'heel' of Italy's 'boot'. Italy was in the process of surrendering to the Allies at this time, but the Italian Fascists still controlled much of the country. Almost the whole northern half of Italy was still considered enemy territory, and just months before, Grottaglie had been a primary base for the Fascist Italian Air Force – and a target of Allied bombing attacks from squadrons based in North Africa. Between Allied bombings and the damage caused by retreating armies, Grottaglie had been left in a shambolic state. Yet, the Allies made it their home.

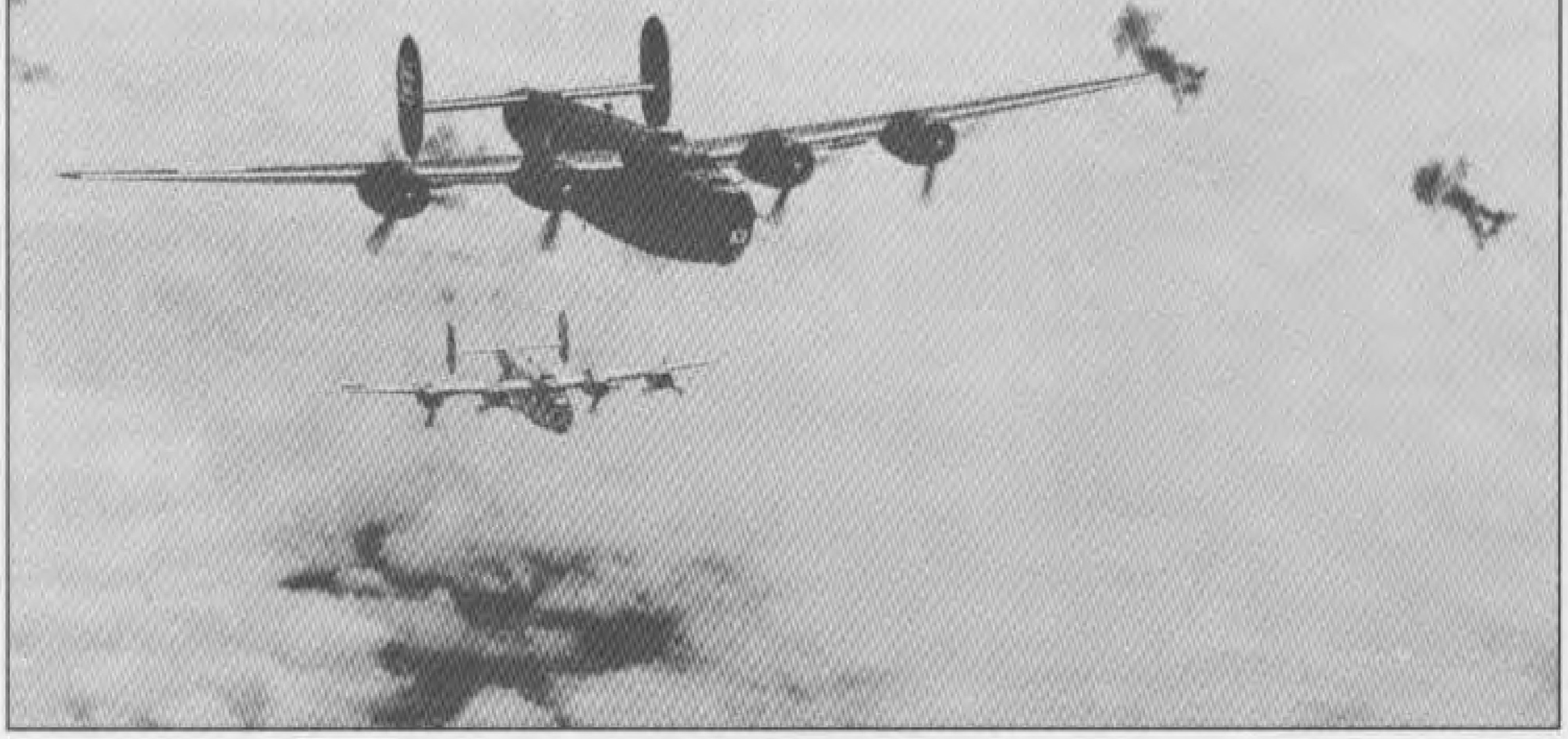
1Lt Don Currier, a Liberator pilot with the 718th BS/449th BG, remembered the base, and its two prominent dirigible hangars;

'Remember the *Norge* and the *Roma*? Our special trade mark was that pair of old, bombed-out dirigible hangars with only the skeleton frameworks showing. Our base had been taken over by the Germans, and the American Twelfth Air Force had bombed it heavily in the autumn of 1943. When we got there in December 1943 the base was pretty much a mess. We had one 4000-ft PSP runway and practically nothing else.

'Our squadron, the 718th of the 449th BG, lived in tents in an olive grove. On the other side of the field was a British unit with a mixed bag of aircraft – Hurricanes, Wellingtons, a few Beaufighters and some Mosquitos. They had crews from several countries. We used the original control tower, but the wind sock was the only landing help we ever had in the six months I was there.'

Grottaglie and numerous other bases in southern Italy including Manduria, San Pancrazio and Lecce were significant to the Allied war effort because for the first time strategic Axis held targets in central Europe came within range of four-

Depending on how you looked at it, a formation of B-24 Liberators en route to a target was either a finely orchestrated picture of harmony in motion or a huge, awkward, ungainly mess. These B-24s are maintaining what seems like an orderly formation despite the flak behind heaved up at them. Note the two black puffs off the wingtip of the centre aircraft. Those are near misses by German guns (*AAF via Neal Schneider*)



During the war years, it seemed that every Liberator crew had a group photo taken, usually at the start of their tour in the frontline. The crew always lined up in front of the nose of their bomber, and they always formed two rows. Some always looked too young to be in the action, like M1A1 0.30-cal carbine-toting Dawsey Shriver at the extreme right of the front row. The number of firearms in evidence, and the ready look of this crew, is a sure sign (along with the three-digit numbers on the Liberators) that this portrait was taken at a stateside training base – in this instance in Florida. In the war zone, the men dispensed with the useless weapons and looked less sure of themselves. This is the crew of pilot Sidney 'Red' Stevens of the 719th BS/449th BG 'Flying Horsemen', which fought the war from Grottaglie, Italy. Bombardier for this Liberator crew is Henry A Wiltse, seen wearing a black shirt in the back row, second from left (*Paige Wiltse Osborne*)

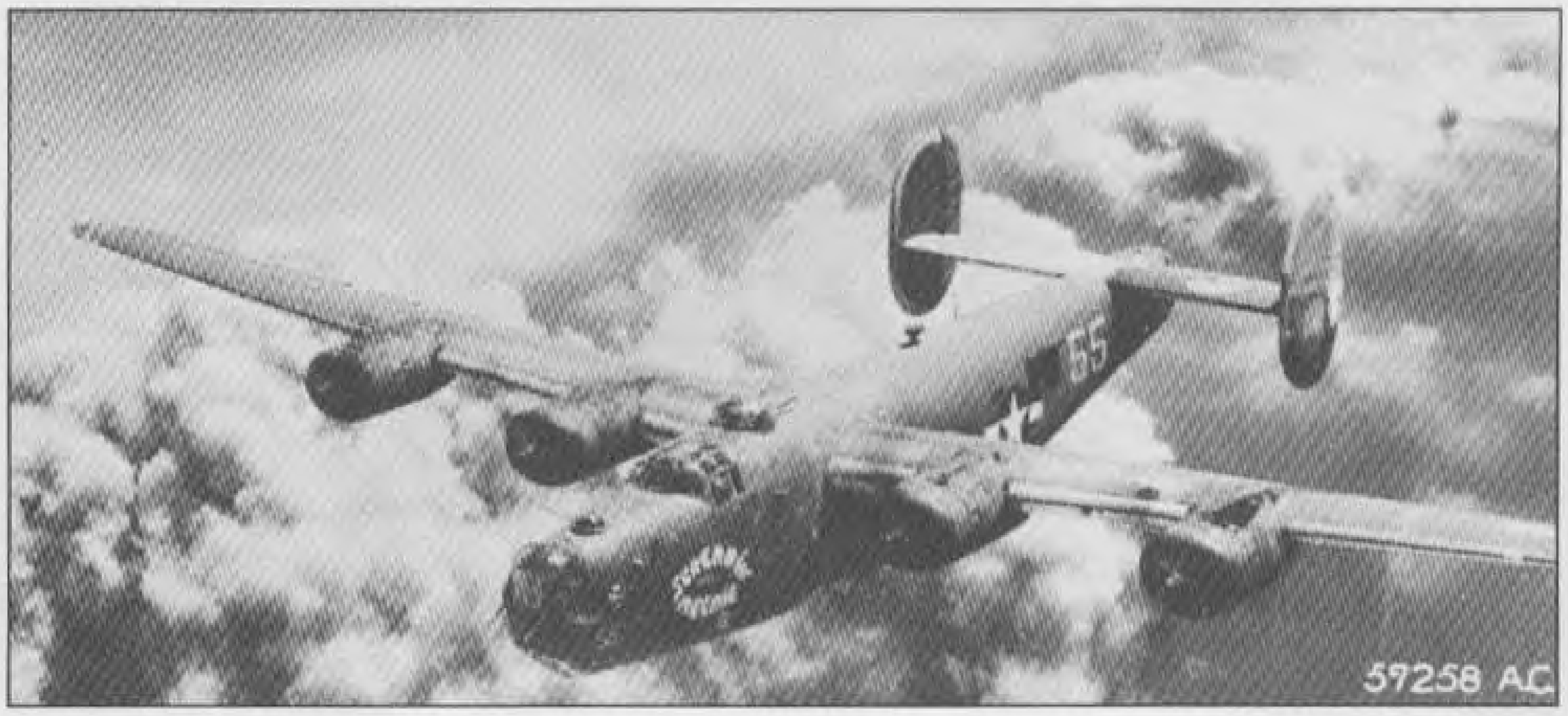
engined bombers – meaning, of course, the B-24 Liberator, which was longer-legged than the B-17 Flying Fortress. From these bases, the Allies now had the ability to disrupt enemy troop deployments and supply lines. Incidentally, Grottaglie, about seven miles inland from Taranto, had once been headquarters of the Italian lighter-than-air fleet.

On 2 December 1943, Liberator crews were sent to bomb the Bolzano marshalling yards, which were being used by the Germans in Italy. Tracks and rolling stock in the southern end of the yards was badly damaged. Four days later, Fortresses and Liberators attacked German targets in Greece. These strikes at airfields around Athens were meant to address a nagging problem – the Germans still held Greece, allowing the Luftwaffe to remain a threat to Allied shipping in the western Mediterranean.

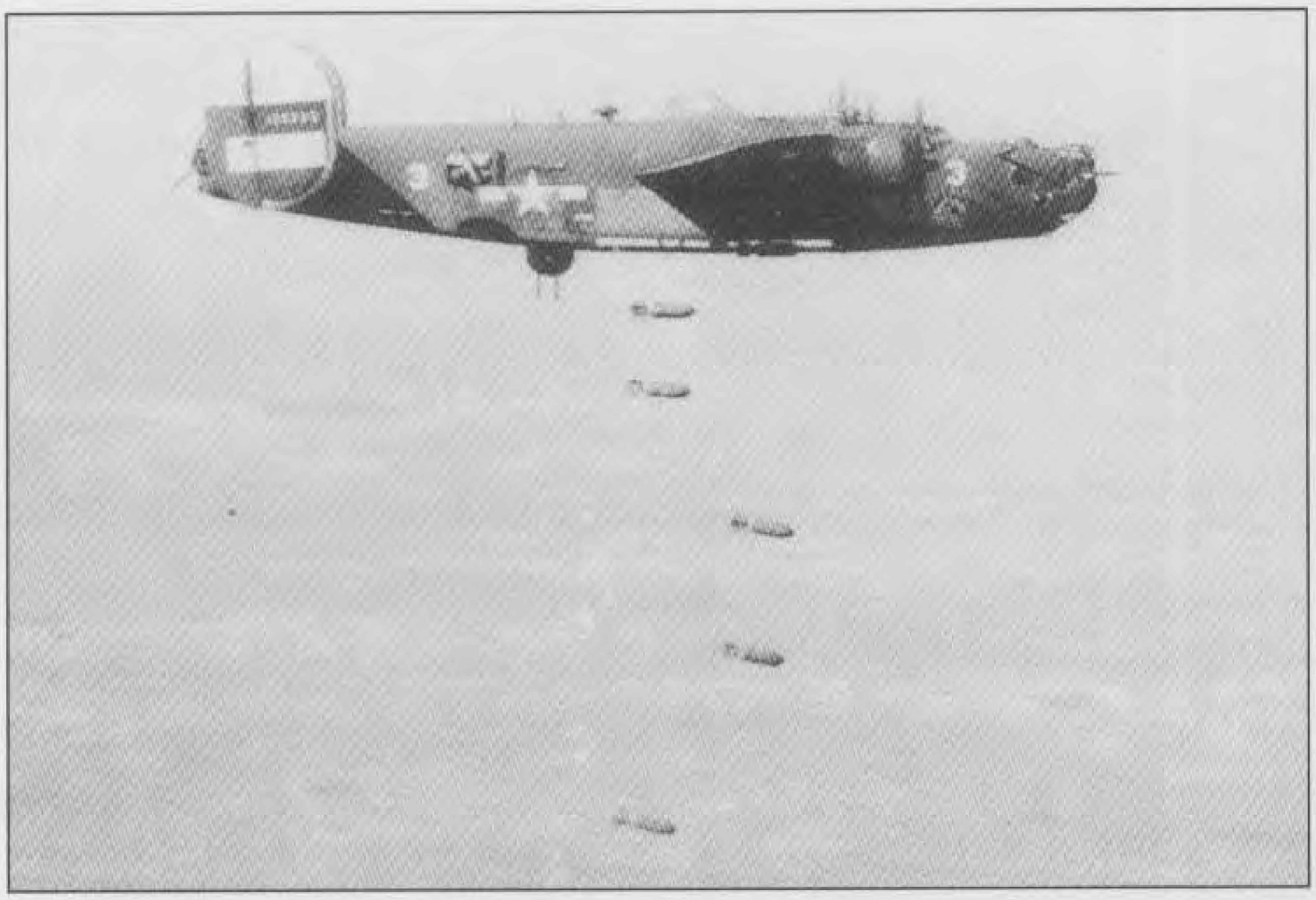
## CBO MISSION

As part of the Combined Bomber Offensive, Fifteenth Liberators set forth on 19 December 1943 for the Messerschmitt factory at Augsburg, site of Bf 110 production and experimental work. Fifty Liberators dropped 172,000 lb of bombs through an undercast and tangled with about 50 Luftwaffe interceptors. The German defenders shot down three B-24s while Liberator gunners were credited with 13 German fighters destroyed.

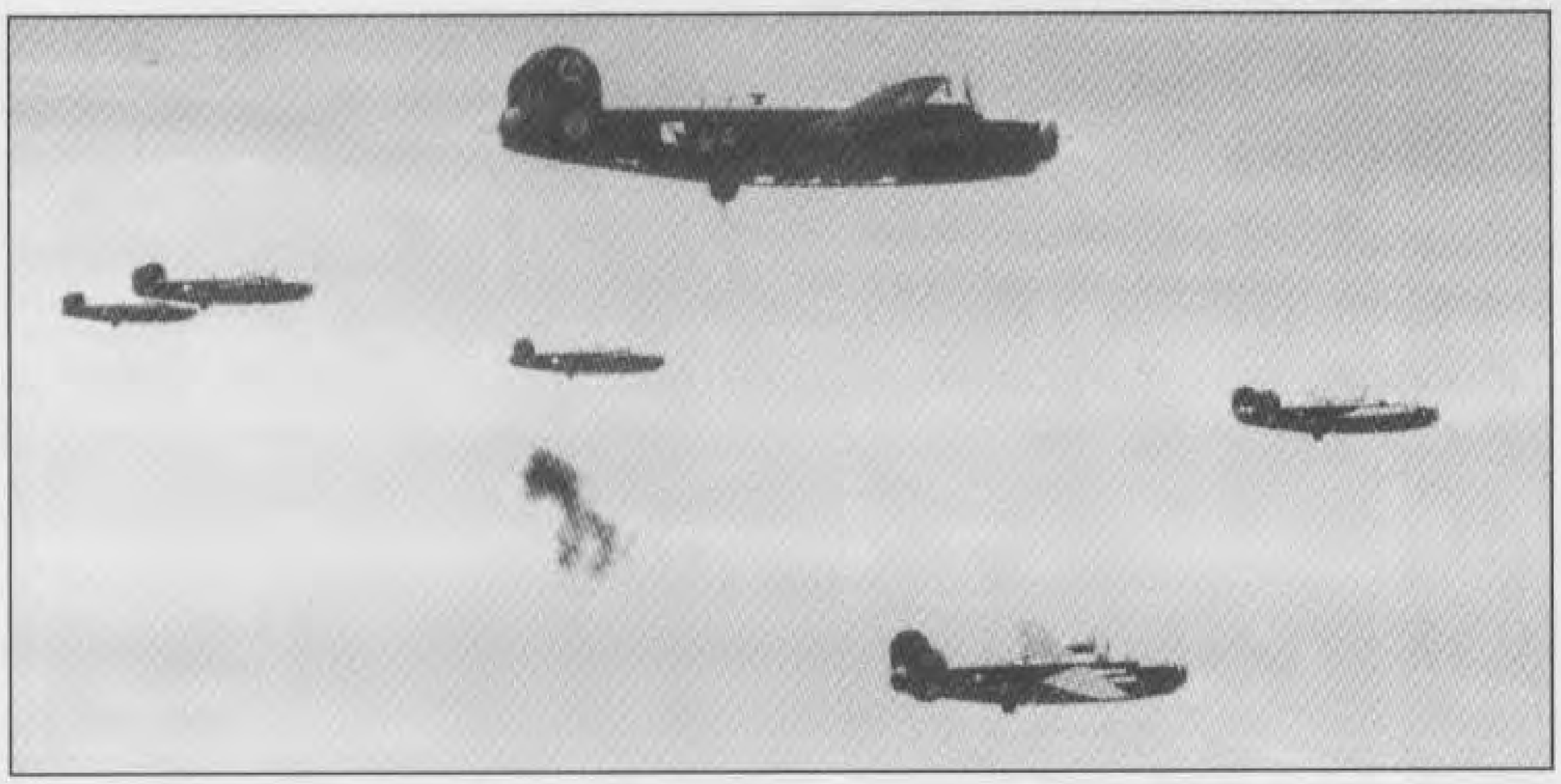
The Fifteenth Air Force was very much finding its way during its second month of its existence – and learning much about the vagaries of southern European weather – so the Liberator effort was slow during much of December. That changed on the 28th of the month when the 376th BG 'Liberandos' flew a maximum effort against the Vincenza marshalling yard. In a short, furious battle, Luftwaffe fighters shot ten bombers out of the sky. It was the equivalent of an entire Liberator squadron, with 100 men killed or captured.



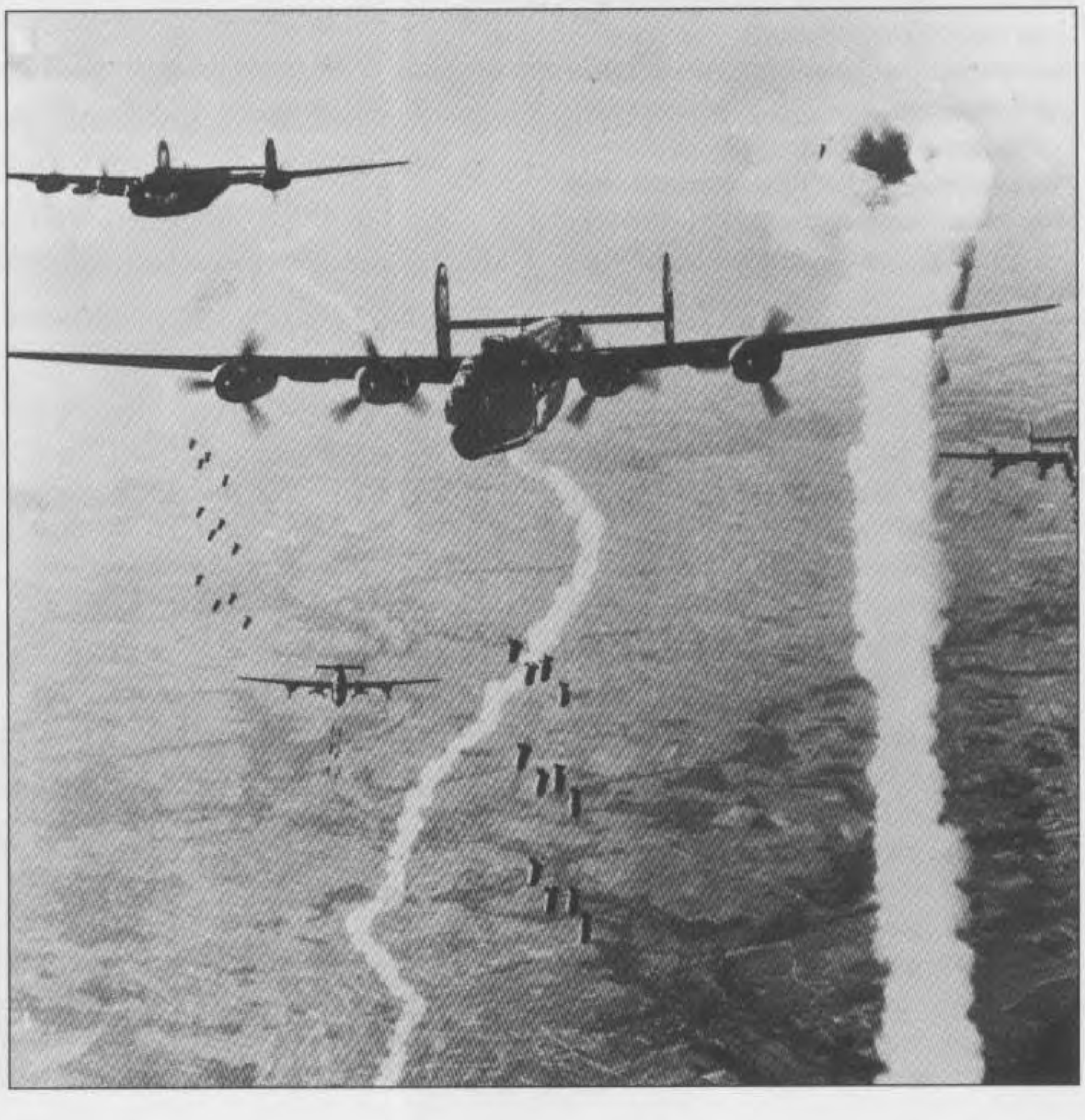
***SCREAMiN' MEEMIE II*****, battle number 55, was an olive-drab Douglas B-24H-15-DT (41-29850) of the 726th BS/451st BG. The H-model was popular with crews because it had the features of later Liberators (power turrets all around, for example) but remained relatively lightweight, allowing it to fly a few miles per hour faster than the B-24J (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**



*STINKY* was a Douglas-assembled B-24H-10-DT Liberator (41-29333) of the 764th BS/461st BG. As the war progressed, this early participant in Fifteenth Air Force operations eventually had its turrets removed and plated over and became the 764th BS hack (*Wally Stewart*)



Bomb-bay doors open (the bombs can just be seen in silhouette attached to their racks), B-24Hs from the 376th BG run in to the target accompanied by a solitary flak burst (AAF *via Allan G Blue*)



'Bombs Away!' Liberators drop their ordnance using distinctive 'Skymarker' chemical smoke bombs as target indicators. These had earlier been dropped by the lead formation Pathfinders (AAF *via Allan G Blue*)

Between Christmas and new year's eve low clouds and heavy snow dulled the fledgling Fifteenth Air Force effort as 1943 came to an end and the air force marked two months of existence. At this juncture, the bombing campaign – indeed, all of the thinking about it, including the notion that American bombers could do their job successfully in daylight – was still very much in doubt, waiting to be proven. But already, bad weather or not, more Liberators were arriving from the American industrial heartland, more crews were starting into the training and combat regimen, and more targets were showing up on planners' lists. In the new year to come, it would soon be learned whether the boldly-conceived strategic bombing effort would work.

# 1944

At the start of 1944, the Fifteenth Air Force was still forming itself while carrying out strategic bombing missions on a limited scale. The two groups that had been on the scene when the air force was created the previous November (the 98th BG 'Pyramiders' and the 376th BG 'Liberandos') were getting a well-deserved break and licking their wounds, although both would return to action in February. Meanwhile, Maj Gen James H Doolittle's short-lived period as the Fifteenth's commander ended on 3 January 1944 when Maj Gen Nathan F Twining replaced him.

The Fifteenth Air Force was now beginning to show visible progress on its way to attaining a long-standing AAF goal of 15 heavy bomber groups, all but two equipped with Liberators. The 449th, 450th, 451st, 454th, 455th and 456th BGs (each equipped with the B-24H Liberator, which was to remain the most popular variant because it combined the heavy armament of later models with a lighter gross weight) all settled in Italy at the outset of the new year.

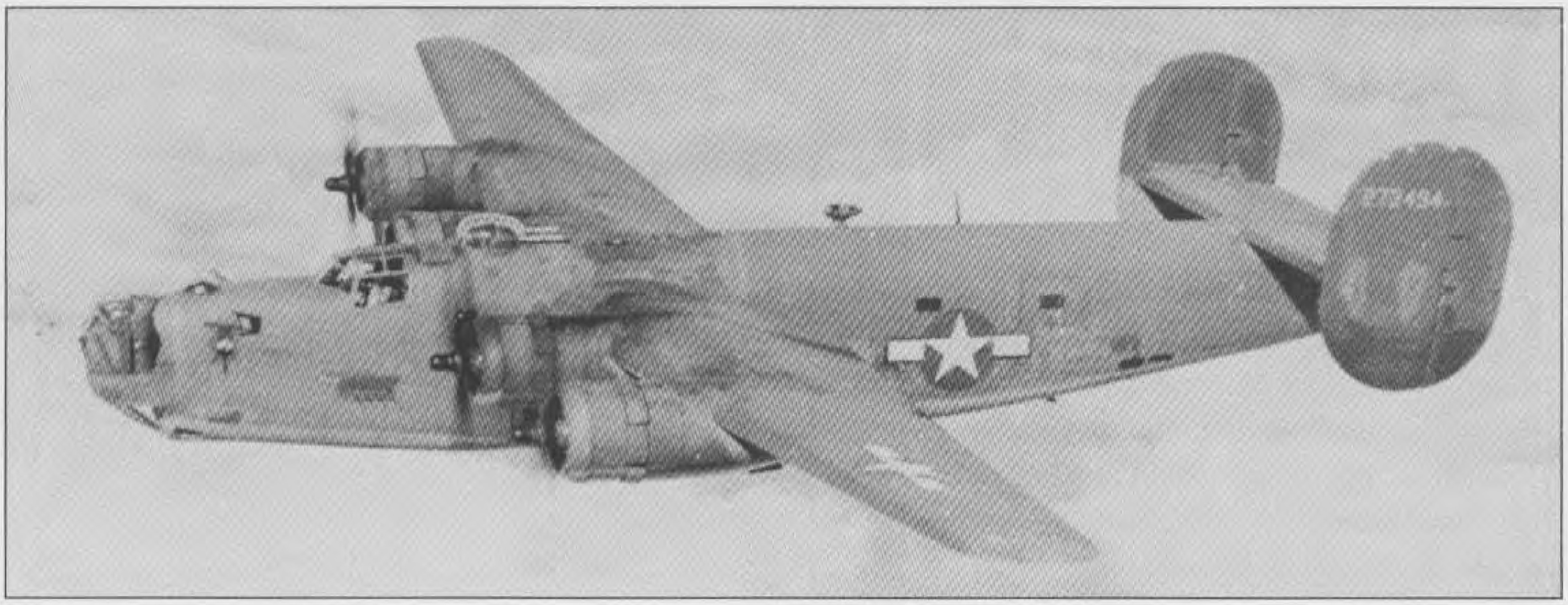
With an effective date of 8 January 1944, the 450th BG stood up at Manduria as part of the 47th BW. Also part of the wing as of that date was the 451st BG, which set up shop first at Gioia del Colle, before moving to San Pancrazio. The group's assignment to the 47th BW would be only a temporary one, for it would subsequently join the 49th BW and shift its operations again to Castellucio, south of Foggia.

## ANZIO

Also on 8 January 1944, the 449th and 450th BGs paid a visit to the Luftwaffe fighter airstrip at Mostar, in Yugoslavia. On this particular day the weather was distinctly better than usual, and it marked the start of a busy period for the new the Fifteenth Air Force, with bomb missions occurring almost daily. The Liberator was taking its place as the principal bomber in theatre, but was not yet using its long range to full advantage – most strikes were being flown within Italy, where German forces were still deeply entrenched, and Italian forces remained a formidable foe as well. These Italian strikes were not considered part of the CBO (Combined Bomber Offensive).

On 22 January 1944, the Allies launched Operation *Shingle* in an effort to establish a beachhead at Anzio, on Italy's western coast, south-west of Rome. Supported by air operations including B-24 activity, the American brass hoped to achieve an 'end run' around a

**_NIGHTMARE_ is the name of this Liberator (exactly which aircraft this is has eluded historians) of the 459th BG at Giulia Field, near Cerignola, but the word could also be used to describe major engine maintenance work being performed outdoors in the crudest of primitive conditions (_459th BG Association_)**



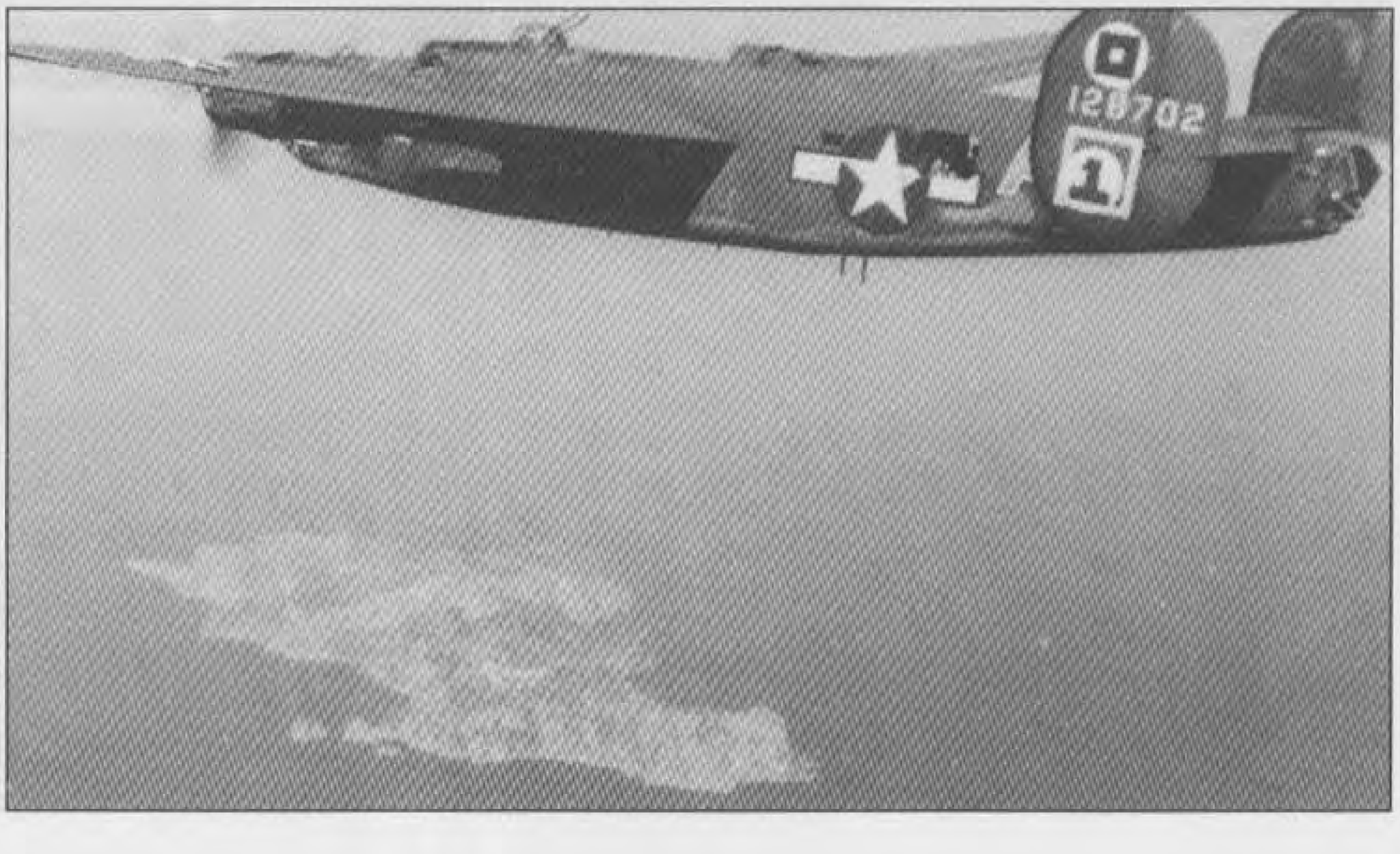
In 1943 and 1944, Fifteenth Air Force units began to receive H-, J-, L- and M-model Liberators, all of which were equipped with powered nose turrets. The B-24H version, which was lighter than the others, was a favourite amongst crews, although the definitive MTO model was the heavier B-24J. This study depicts an early J-model in flight (*via Robert F Dorr*)

long-standing stalemate at Cassino, but expected fierce resistance along the beaches from German firepower.

When the first waves landed unopposed and charged inland, Maj Gen John P Lucas, commander of the Fifth Army's VI Corps, and of the 36,000 invasion troops, was puzzled that he had gained his Anzio foothold without casualties. Too timid for the situation, he decided not to advance inland until a week had passed, and 70,000 more Allied troops had been brought ashore. Lucas had once written in a diary that, 'I am far too tender-hearted ever to be a success at my chosen profession'.

Lucas' boss Gen Mark Clark had passed along vaguely-worded orders to move toward the Alban Hills 20 miles inland and, eventually, to link-up with the remainder of the Fifth Army to the south on D-Day +7. In what became a relentless controversy, neither general interpreted these orders as specifically charging VI Corps with the immediate capture of the Alban Hills. That attitude reflected Clark's and Lucas's scepticism regarding the largely British invasion plan, but it also sealed the doom of thousands of GIs. When the Germans finally began pouring fire into the troops on the beachhead, they inflicted horrendous casualties.

Among thousands caught on the beachhead because of Lucas's reluctance to attack, American cartoonist Bill Mauldin of the 'Willie and Joe' series listened to German cannons crashing and watched American soldiers caught in artillery barrages around him. An artillery barrage pulverised a building housing war correspondents and wounded several, among them Ernie Pyle, who promptly filed a newspaper story describing himself as feeling 'very old and beat-up'. Lucas's failure to move decisively resulted in American and some British troops being mauled in a counteroffensive that cost at least 29,000 casualties – double the number of the Normandy invasion. The liberation of Rome was delayed by weeks or months, and the challenges to the B-24 Liberator crews of the Fifteenth Air Force were kept at a high level.



The place name is familiar to anyone who has ever heard a musical ditty about love and romance in the Bay of Naples. But there is little sentiment in this circa 1944 portrait of Tulsa-assembled Douglas B-24H-10-DT Liberator 41-28702 winging its way over the isle of Capri (*via Jim Sullivan* )

While the confusion at Anzio persisted, 27 Liberators of the 450th BG, escorted by 28 Lightnings, went to Istres and dropped hundreds of 500-lb (227-kg) bombs from 21,000 ft (6400 m). The date was 27 January 1944, and German defences were light, but one Liberator was lost to flak and nine more sustained damage.

## BIGGER MISSION

On 30 January 1944, a big bombing effort that included 63 B-24s was sent to attack Udine airfield in northern Italy – the Liberators all dropped fragmentation bombs. Men peering down from the B-24s could see bombs detonating on both airfield buildings and the 40-odd Luftwaffe aircraft found at the base. A persistent force of Bf 109s and Fw 190s downed two Liberators, while gunners claimed 14 fighters destroyed. The mission was one of several mounted by Liberators and Flying Fortresses against airfields at Udine, Aviano and (across the Austrian border) Klagenfurt, destroying or damaging German aircraft and complicating the Luftwaffe's challenge of maintaining a credible air defence.

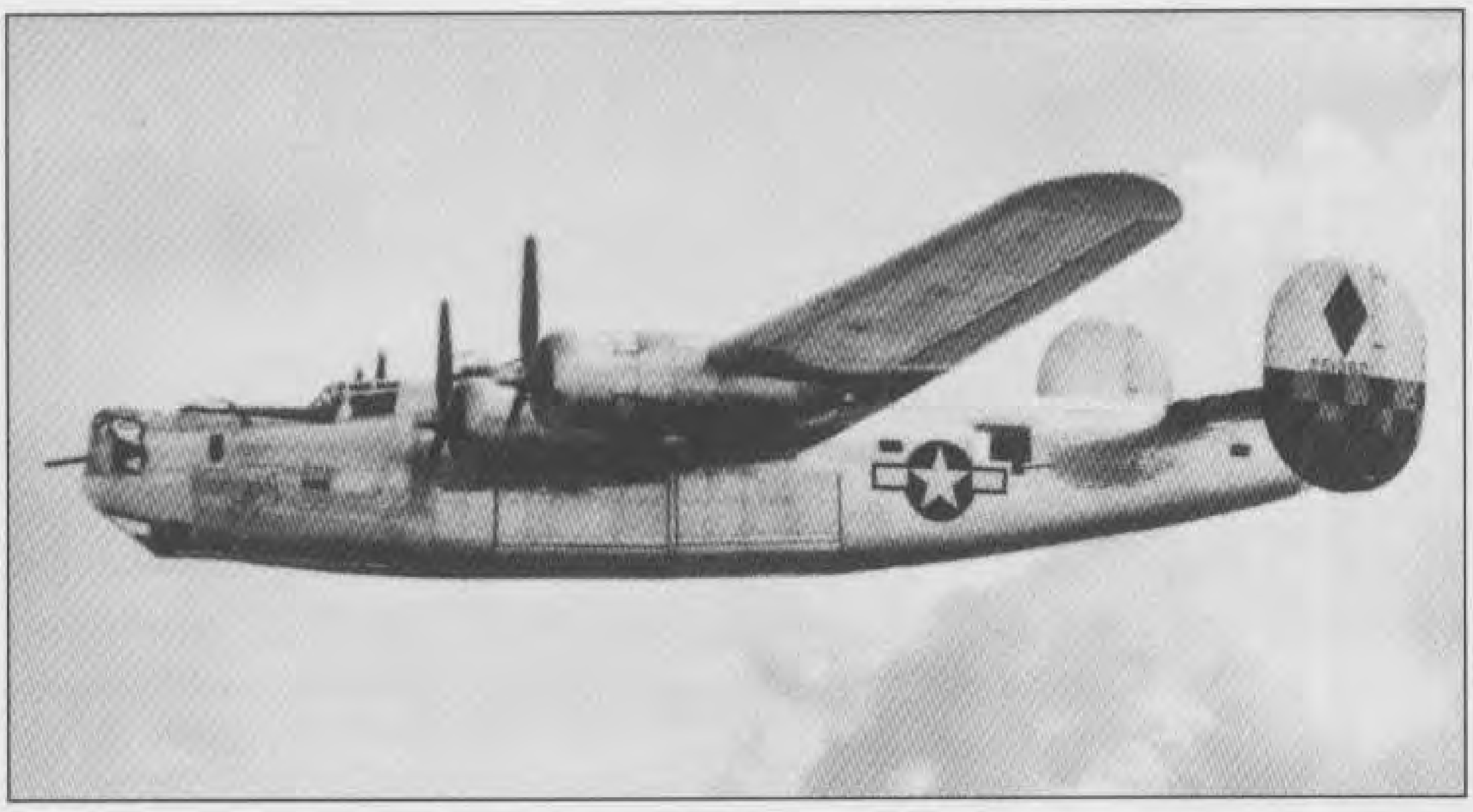
The tempo of operations against Luftwaffe bases and other targets was reduced in February 1944 when weather hampered flying throughout the Italian peninsula. Indeed, Liberators succeeded in getting aloft only one day in three during the month. On a brighter note, the second month of the year marked the entry of the 304th BW into combat, starting on 8 February when the 454th BG struck the airfield at Orvieto. Four days later the 455th BG became operational as part of the same wing, which was headquartered at Cerignola.

## BIG WEEK

The biggest effort so far for Italian-based Liberator crews was to be Operation *Argument*, which was a joint effort staged by both the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces during daylight hours and RAF Bomber Command at night. Their target was Germany's aircraft industry. United States Strategic Air Forces (the headquarters in England which was responsible for the Eighth and Fifteenth) wanted to inflict a heavy blow on airframe and assembly plants which produced the Luftwaffe's single- and twin-engined fighters, and against the ball-bearing industry. Because the latter was concentrated in a handful of locations, it was felt that by attacking the capacity to manufacture ball-bearings, Allied bombers would be striking at the Luftwaffe's Achilles' Heel.

Operation *Argument*, readied and then delayed because of bad weather in February, was finally unleashed during the six days of 20-25 February 1944. The Eighth Air Force and the RAF put every airworthy four-engined bomber into the assault, and struck every major aircraft plant in the Third Reich on five of those six days. This brief period of heavy fighting became known as 'Big Week', and began with the Eighth Air Force's 20 February 1944 attack on Leipzig – the first 1000-aeroplane daylight bombing mission. On the opening two days of the offensive the Fifteenth Air Force kicked its heels, but the crews nevertheless knew a big mission was in the offing. Former S/Sgt Harry Pribyla, a gunner with the 454th BG, remembers;

'We sensed that this was different. The wake-up was earlier and a little more abrupt. The weather briefing, the officers on the crew told me later,



***Betty Anne* strikes a classic pose. This particular aircraft is Douglas-assembled B-24J-1-DT 42-51262, its checkerboard tail marking signifying its assignment to the 459th BG and the diamond denoting the 304th BW. This portrait was taken when *Betty Anne* was still a recent arrival in the MTO, hence the unusually clean appearance of an aircraft flying from bases where it was all too easy to get dirty (*459th BG Association*)**

was more thorough and lasted longer. There was a chill in the air in those hours before dawn when we were briefed, and realised it was going to be a very long day.'

As it turned out, it was a very long week, but only after false starts. The first *Argument* strike for the Fifteenth was flown by B-17s. Then Liberators intended for the 'Big Week' strikes were diverted, instead, to supporting troops at the Anzio beachhead.

Then it came. On 22 February 1944, the Fifteenth Air Force launched 102 B-24s against a series of targets clustered around the Steyr Waekzkagerverk ball-bearing facility at Steyr, Austria, which was reputed to supply about ten per cent of the Third Reich's ball-bearings. P-38s went part-way to the target with the bomber formation, but were not around when at least 100 Luftwaffe fighters swarmed down on the Liberators.

To Pribyla it was 'like a stop-motion movie', watching the Messerschmitts snap in and out of view from the limited perspective of a Liberator's waist-gun position. The gunner watched, helpless, as a Bf 109 assaulted another Liberator from above sawed off its port wingtip with bursts of gunfire. 'The B-24 went into a slow, lazy roll, and kept going, Nobody got out'. In all, the Third Reich's aggressive fighter pilots claimed 17 Liberators that day, but the damage done to German industry at Steyr was rated as 'very significant' in a report.

The way 'Big Week' turned out, most of the raids against German industry were carried out by the Eighth Air Force, while most of the Fifteenth's effort was undertaken by Flying Fortresses.

At least until Regensburg on 24 February. There, the 450th BG with 29 Liberators fought through Luftwaffe fighters to deliver its bombs. Again, the Luftwaffe pilots were knowledgeable and persistent, but gunners aboard the Liberators claimed two Bf 109s on the way into the target. The ultimate cost was four Liberators, two of which were crippled initially, fell from formation and were later picked off by fighters. The 450th BG pilots then found themselves approaching a colossal cloud back that blocked their path, and had to descend to wave-top level to struggle across the sea to their base at Manduria.

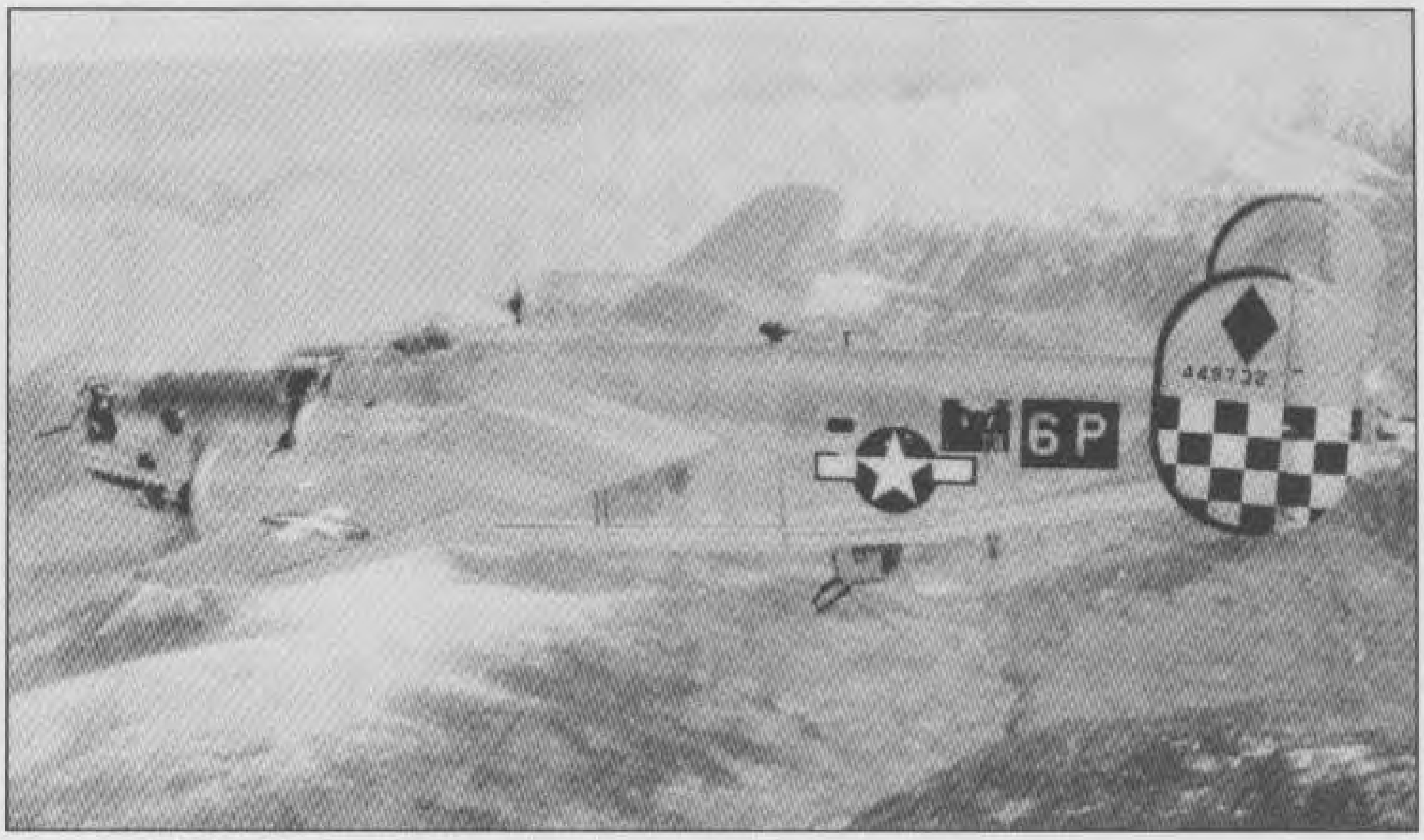
The 449th BG and 451st BG also hit Regensburg that day. Half a dozen more Liberators fell amid furious battles with Luftwaffe fighters.

## RETURN TO STEYR

On 2 April 1944, 168 Liberators returned to Steyr, in Austria. Others in smaller numbers attacked targets in both Austria and Yugoslavia.

Equally unpopular as a target was Bucharest, struck by Liberators on 4 April 1944. Sgt Benedict Yedlin, a B-24H ball turret gunner with the 719th BS/449th BG, remembers that;

'This was the day the 449th BG suffered its greatest loss of aeroplanes in the war. It became known as the "4/4/44 Mission". Seven of the 29 aeroplanes taking part in that first bombing mission to Bucharest were lost due to enemy action. Five of the seven were 719th BS aircraft, the squadron having put up nine aeroplanes that day. The group was awarded a presidential unit citation for the infamous "4/4/44 Mission".'



High over the Alps, Ford B-24L-10-FO Liberator 44-49732 heads for Germany. The numeral '6' in the identification block '6P' identifies this bomber as belonging to the 756th BS, which was part of the 459th BG (*459th BG Association*)

The spring of 1944 saw a renewal of Allied interest in going after German oil-refining capability in the Balkans. Never again would the infamous Ploesti refineries be assaulted at tree-top level, but now Fifteenth Air Force Liberators would arrive again and again to strike from high altitude. On 5 April 1944, 95 B-17s and 135 B-24s went to Ploesti, but this time not to the oilfields but to the marshalling yards, partly in hope of crippling the railhead upon which petroleum shipping was dependent. Gunners claimed 41 German fighters but 13 bombers fell. A considerable part of the bombing spilled over from the railyards to the refineries, wreaking visible destruction. This redeemed planners at Fifteenth headquarters, who still believed – notwithstanding different opinions about the low-level raid the previous year – that oil refineries were exceedingly vulnerable to bombing attack.

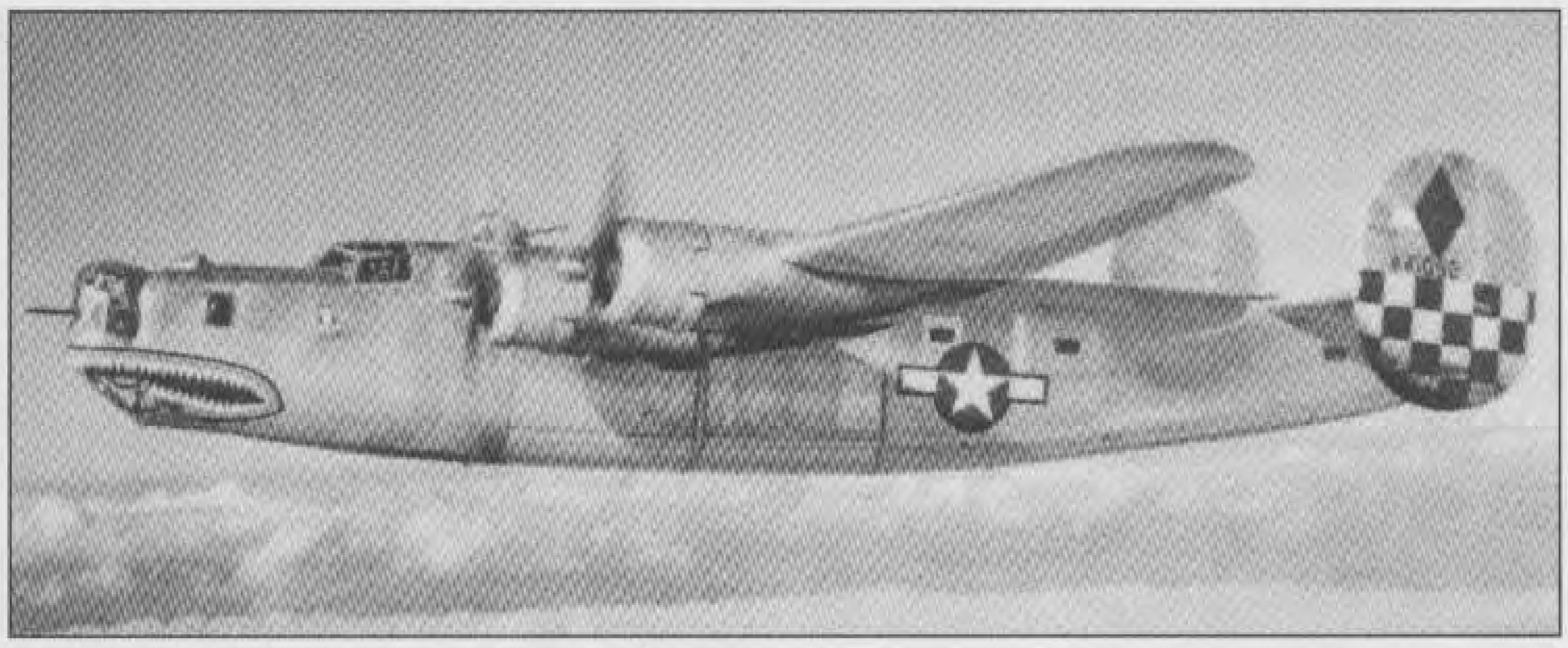
The bombload and flexibility of the Liberator pointed toward another way, as well, to increase the pressure on the Axis. On the night of 8-9 April, three Liberators joined RAF Wellingtons in laying mines in the Danube near Belgrade. The mining operation did not halt all river traffic, but it did force the Germans to concentrate war shipments at several key points along the waterway, including Vienna, which became a familiar target. The mining effort also diverted some shipping to Romanian and Hungarian rail lines, which were already overloaded.

134 Liberators of the 47th BW attacked a Bf 109 fighter assembly facility at Wiener Neustadt on 12 April 1944. That day, while Flying Fortresses ranged elsewhere in search of Messerschmitt manufacturing capabilities, another 140 B-24s of the 304th BW attacked the Bf 109 plant at Bad Voslau. Half a dozen Liberators were lost during these efforts to wear down the Luftwaffe.

On 13 April 1944, 342 Liberators bombed targets in and around Budapest, including a Bf 109 component plant. The cost was 18 bombers and three escort fighters. The Hungarian capital would continue to be one of the most dreaded of targets to Liberator crews for weeks to come, especially when they were sent to Vecses airfield, site of today's Budapest-Ferihegy International Airport.

Romania took on new significance that spring as Soviet troops advanced on a wide front and

In due course, Americans learned that fighting a war from Italian soil meant coping with winter. Here, a Caterpillar tractor clears snow at Venosa while a 485th BG Liberator awaits its next mission (*AAF via William N Hess*)



Just hours after the cameraman snapped this portrait of Consolidated B-24J-195-CO Liberator 44-41092 *Norma*, the 459th BG bomber was blown to smithereens – not as a result of Luftwaffe action, but by a fire and explosion on the hardstand at Giulia Field (*459th BG Association*)

entered the country where the famous Ploesti oil refineries were situated. Now, German forces became heavily dependent on Romanian and Hungarian rail transport to support their withdrawing troops. It was felt that an interdiction campaign against rail traffic would hasten a German retreat and perhaps get Romania out of the war altogether, so the Fifteenth Air Force was given the task of striking rail facilities in Budapest, Bucharest and Ploesti. Some of these attacks were directed against segments of the legendary Orient Express, the line running through Sofia and down to Belgrade.

## BOMBING RESULTS

Among themselves, AAF leaders commiserated over the heavy loss of bombers (mostly B-17s) during 'Big Week', but nevertheless felt happy that they had inflicted a mighty blow. In fact, the results were mixed. The AAF claimed to have destroyed or damaged 68 per cent of German aircraft industry buildings, and to have put the ball-bearing industry out of operation for eight weeks. In fact, 'Big Week' may have unwittingly helped the Axis, for it forced the Germans to recognise the need to disperse their airframe assembly and ball-bearing production capabilities.

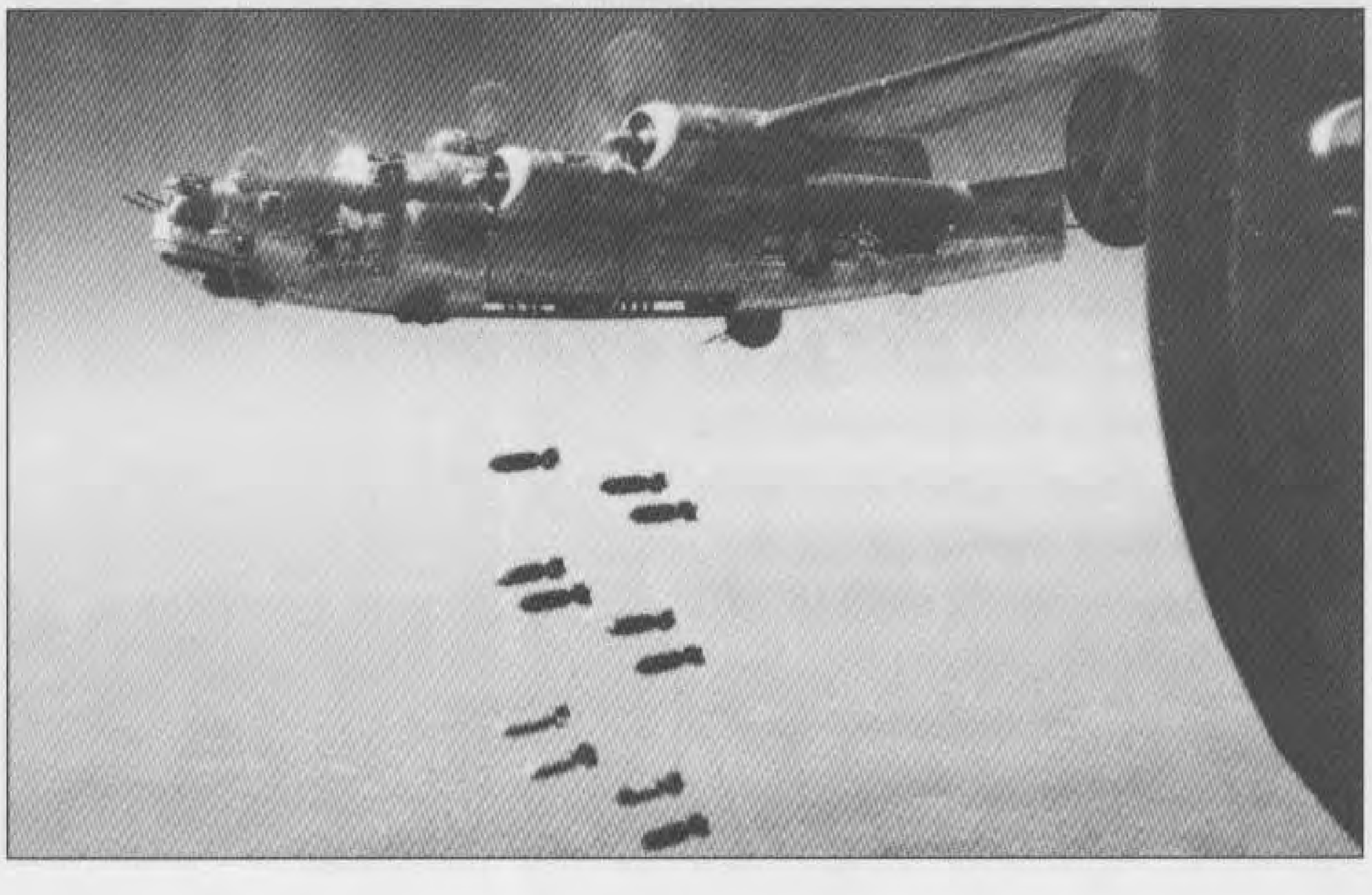
The Luftwaffe had lost many experienced pilots in battle during 'Big Week', however, and the raids would initially deprive the Germans of about 500 newly-built fighters they would otherwise have had, but the bombing effort also led them to render their facilities less vulnerable to future attack.

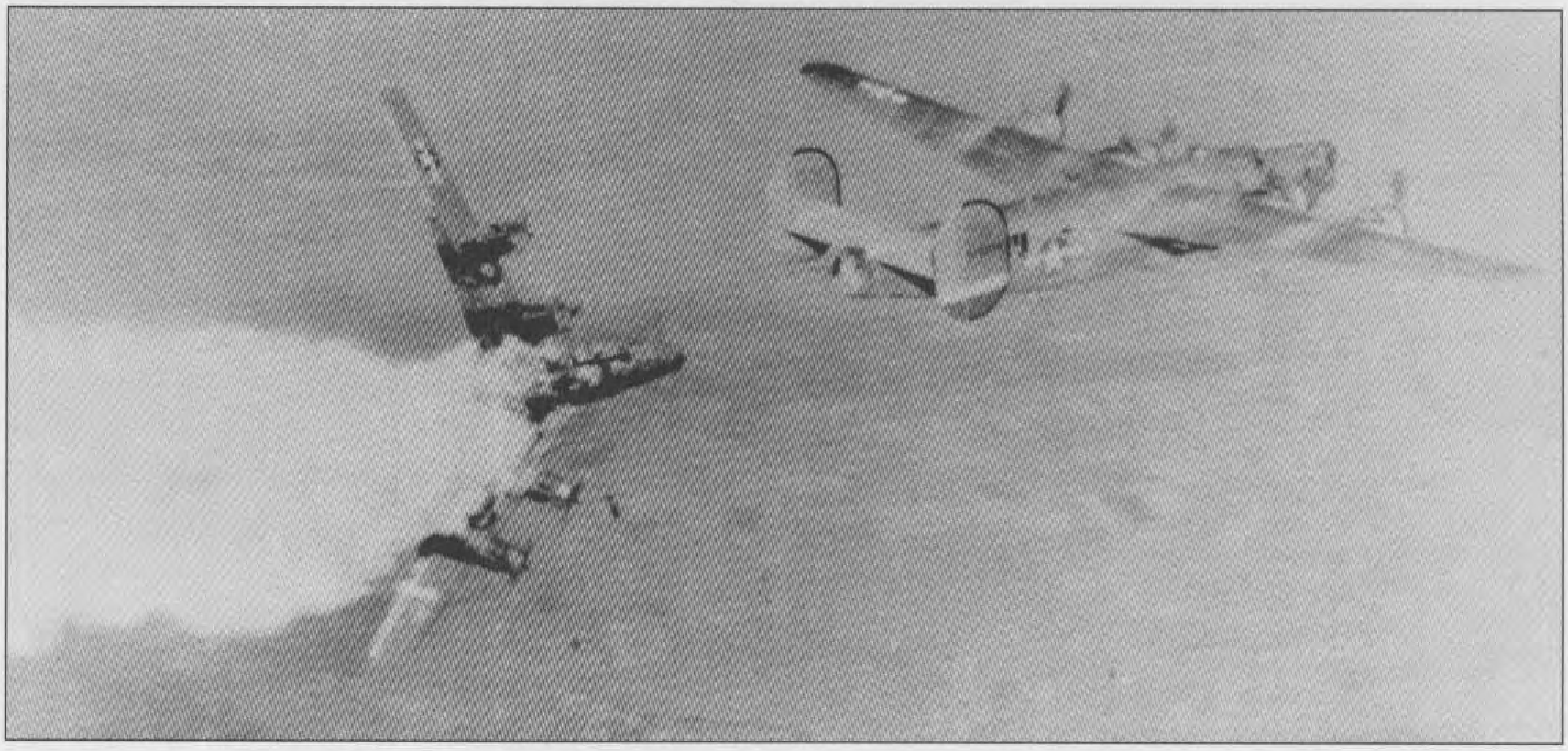
During mid-April 1944, a fourth and final combat wing began duty with the Fifteenth Air Force. The 49th BW was formed at Castellucio and immediately acquired the 451st BG from the 47th BW and the 461st BG (at Torretto) from the 55th BW. The 49th BW subsequently picked up its third and final group when the 485th BG set up shop at Venosa.

The Fifteenth Air Force Liberator force was filled out for the remainder of the war when the 55th BW acquired three additional groups, namely the 460th and 465th BGs at Panatela and the 485th BG at Venosa.

This completed the wartime order of battle for the Fifteenth, although the B-24 Liberator force was still a long way away from assuming its ultimate identity. In April and May 1944, the AAF was only beginning to dispense with olive-drab paint on its four-engined bombers. Natural metal Liberators were emerging from the factories, but apparently did not reach Italy until June. The complex, and often

Ten 500-lb (227-kg) bombs was the standard B-24 load in the MTO, but in this scene eleven of them are falling from *DOGPATCH EXPRESS's* bomb-bay. *Dogpatch* was the fictional hillbilly backwater in Al Capp's comic strip *L'il Abner*. At least two Liberators carried the *DOGPATCH EXPRESS* name, and this particular one is thought to be Ford-built B-24L-15-FO Liberator 44-49750 of the 756h BS/459th BG (*459th BG Association*)





There is conflicting information about this oft-published Liberator photograph, but apparently it shows a bomber of the 781st BS/ 465th BG going down over Blechhamer on 20 November 1944. The Liberator was piloted by Lt Col Clarence Lokker, CO of the 781st. Six of the eleven crewmen escaped successfully, Lokker included, although after being captured, then escaping, Lokker was killed on the ground later that same day (*AAF via Robert F Dorr*)

inconsistent, markings of the Fifteenth's combat wings, groups and squadrons were still evolving.

## 'LITTLE FRIENDS'

By now, the long-range P-51 Mustang was being introduced as the escort fighter on many missions. The fighter had proven a tremendous help on 21 April 1944 amid much confusion when 304th BW Liberators headed for the Bucharest marshalling yards while B-17s launched toward Ploesti. Because of a nasty weather front that built up early on the flight path to these targets, headquarters recalled all groups, but only the Flying Fortresses received the signal and turned around. The newly-arrived 31st FG (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 7 - Mustang Aces of the Ninth & Fifteenth Air Forces and the RAF* for further details), which had transferred into the strategic Fifteenth Air Force from the tactical Twelfth just weeks earlier, was headed toward Ploesti when the Mustang pilots encountered the embattled Liberators readying to bomb Bucharest.

The silvery American fighters tore into a gaggle of Luftwaffe aircraft that had been mauling the B-24s and dragged them away from the bomber formation. Now unburdened by the Luftwaffe, the Liberators continued on to the target and apparently bombed it with no losses. The 31st FG claimed seven German fighters shot down, for the loss of two P-51s and their pilots.

A year earlier, Liberator gunner T/Sgt Robert H Bryson had written an ode to the P-38 Lightning that has long survived its author's own death on an early combat mission. The best-known stanza of Bryson's poem begins with a reference to the draft board, which didn't induct everyone into the Army;

'Well, they wouldn't reject us
So heaven protect us
And, until all this shooting abates,
Give us the courage to fight 'em, and –
One other small item –
An escort of P-38s.'

This outer wing section was part of the remains of Lokker's Liberator – see the photograph on the previous page. The location of the crash became Polish territory after VE-Day, and locals built a memorial on this spot to honour the Fifteenth Air Force crewmen that went down with the bomber (*F Grabowski*)

The Mustang had longer legs than the Lightning, and its arrival on the scene was welcome news to Liberator crews, but it would take them time to realise it.

The all-too-familiar Messerschmitt Bf 109 assembly complex at Wiener Neustadt was the target again on 23 April 1944. 33 Liberators joined 171 Fortresses in a strike on the aircraft plants, while 33 Liberators went to the nearby airfield. That day, 107 Liberators attacked the Bf 109 facility at Bad Voslau, whilst 143 more B-24s went to Schwechat where He 219 nightfighters were being built. It was a big day, and the aircraft lost included 11 B-24s.

On 28 April 1944, Liberators bombed the port of Toulon, whilst the following month no fewer than 1393 Fifteenth Air Force B-17s and B-24s struck marshalling yard at Marseilles, Toulon and Lyons between 25 and 27 May. These and other missions were flown directly in support of the invasion of what Churchill called the 'soft underbelly' of Nazi-occupied Europe, although the landings in southern France were still almost four months away.

## MORE MISSIONS

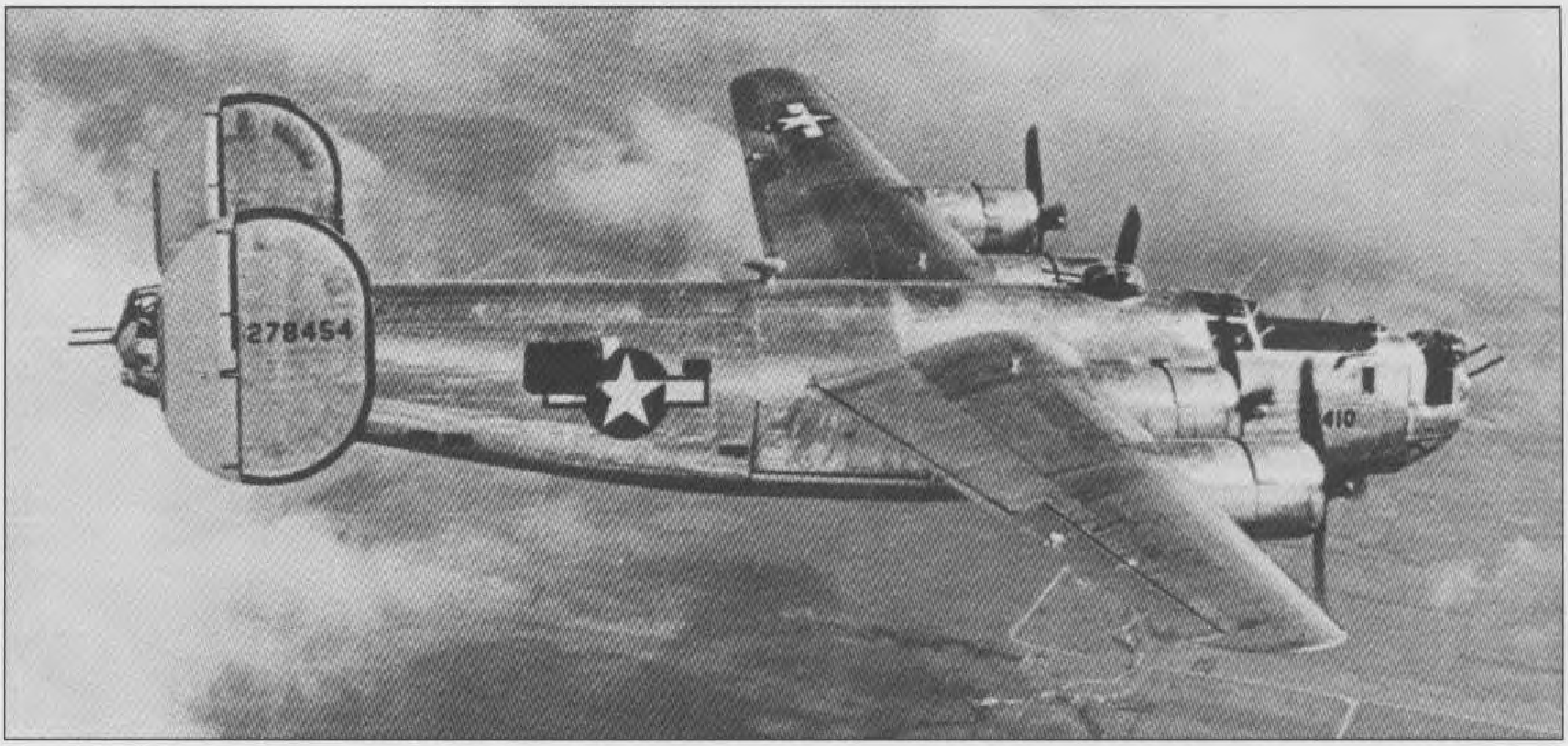
Some 485 Fortresses and Liberators returned to the Ploesti oil refineries on 5 May 1944. This was the largest bombing formation assembled by Fifteenth Air Force to date, and Luftwaffe fighters fought a determined battle with the bombers. 28 were lost in air-to-air action and to ground fire, and once again intelligence experts reported that the mission had dealt a serious blow to the German capacity to refine petroleum.

Five days later it was the all-too-familiar Wiener Neustadt plants again, where Bf 109 production and assembly facilities were struck by 126 B-24s and 174 B-17s. 102 Liberators separately attacked the nearby airfield, and the Fifteenth Air Force lost 28 bombers during this maximum effort. Many of these losses were suffered by the 456th BG, which became separated from other combat groups and was badly mauled by fighters.

On 12 May the Fifteenth Air Force enjoyed its first '1000 sortied day', when 1143 aircraft were launched against a variety of targets in Italy. A week later, 700+ Fortresses and Liberators set forth for a return visit to the Ploesti oil fields. Bad weather prevented all but 206 bombers from getting through, and losses included 14 bombers.

One unusual combat loss on 20 May took the life of 717th BS/449th BG gunner Sgt Samuel J Lake, assigned to Grottaglie-based B-24H-15-DT 41-28846 *THE BRASS MONKEY*. Sadly, the flight apparently wasn't even a bombing mission, Lake wasn't scheduled to fly and the aircraft he was flying in was not the Liberator to which he was assigned. His surviving brother, Lawrence Lake, recalls;

'The only details the family obtained at the time of his death were hearsay. A neighbour's son was stationed nearby and made inquiries. He said Sam was not scheduled to fly that day but went out with a crew to retrieve survivors from a crashed aeroplane. On the way back they crashed when landing due to the failure of two engines. There were no survivors.'



**By 1944 Liberators were emerging from the factories in natural metal and were arriving at Fifteenth Air Force airbases in Italy devoid of unit markings, which were quickly added when they went into combat. This study depicts North American-built B-24G-16-NT 42-78454 shortly before reaching Italy. The majority of G-models went to the MTO (*NAA via Robert F Dorr*)**

An AAF report on the crash uses graphic language to tell us that Liberator crews were caught up in very serious business. 'Direct cause of death: decapitation (severe)'. The report was sent to the family years later without comment, and with no clue as to what sort of decapitation might *not* be severe. To this day, relatives of those aboard the aircraft have no other details.

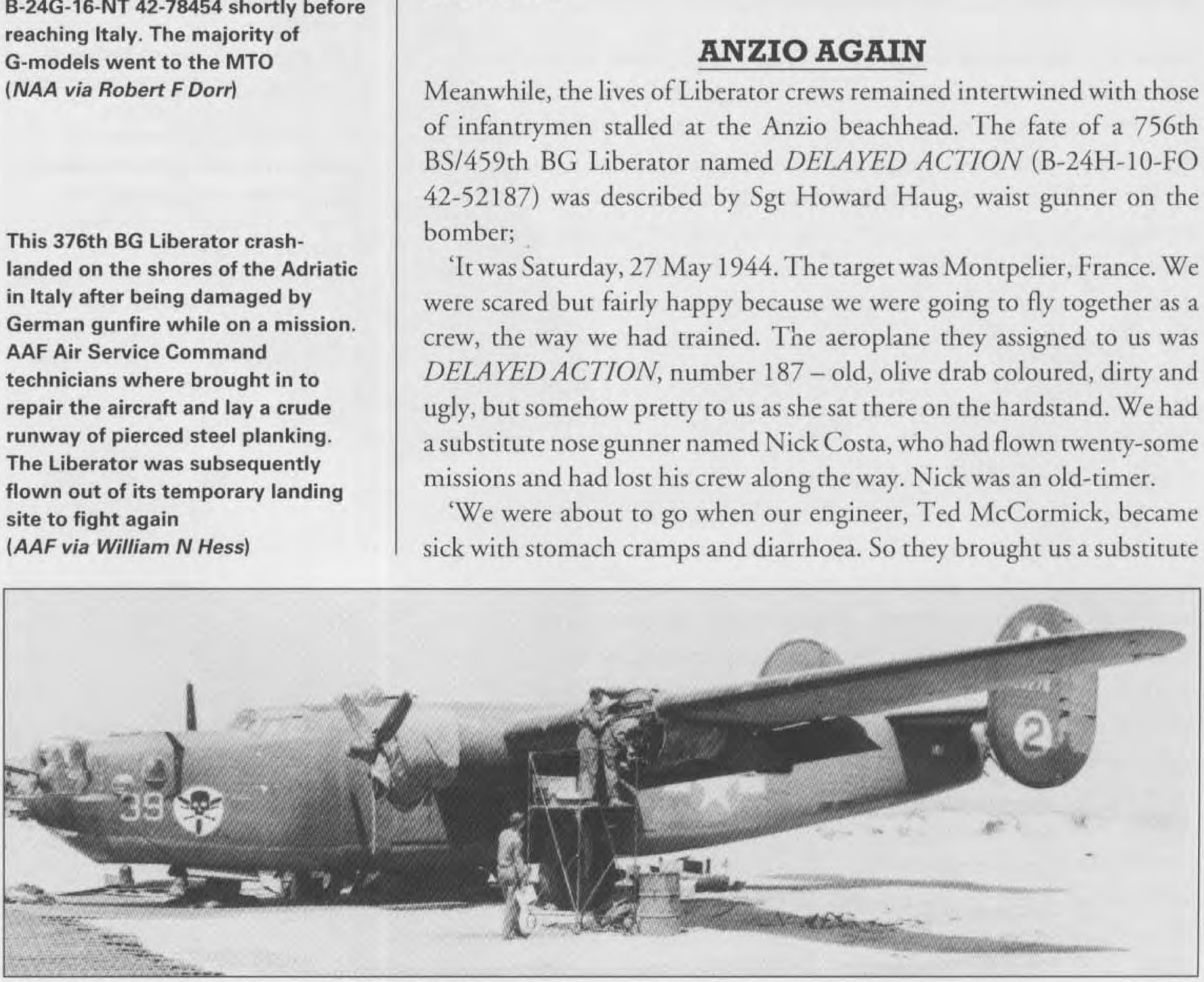
## ANZIO AGAIN

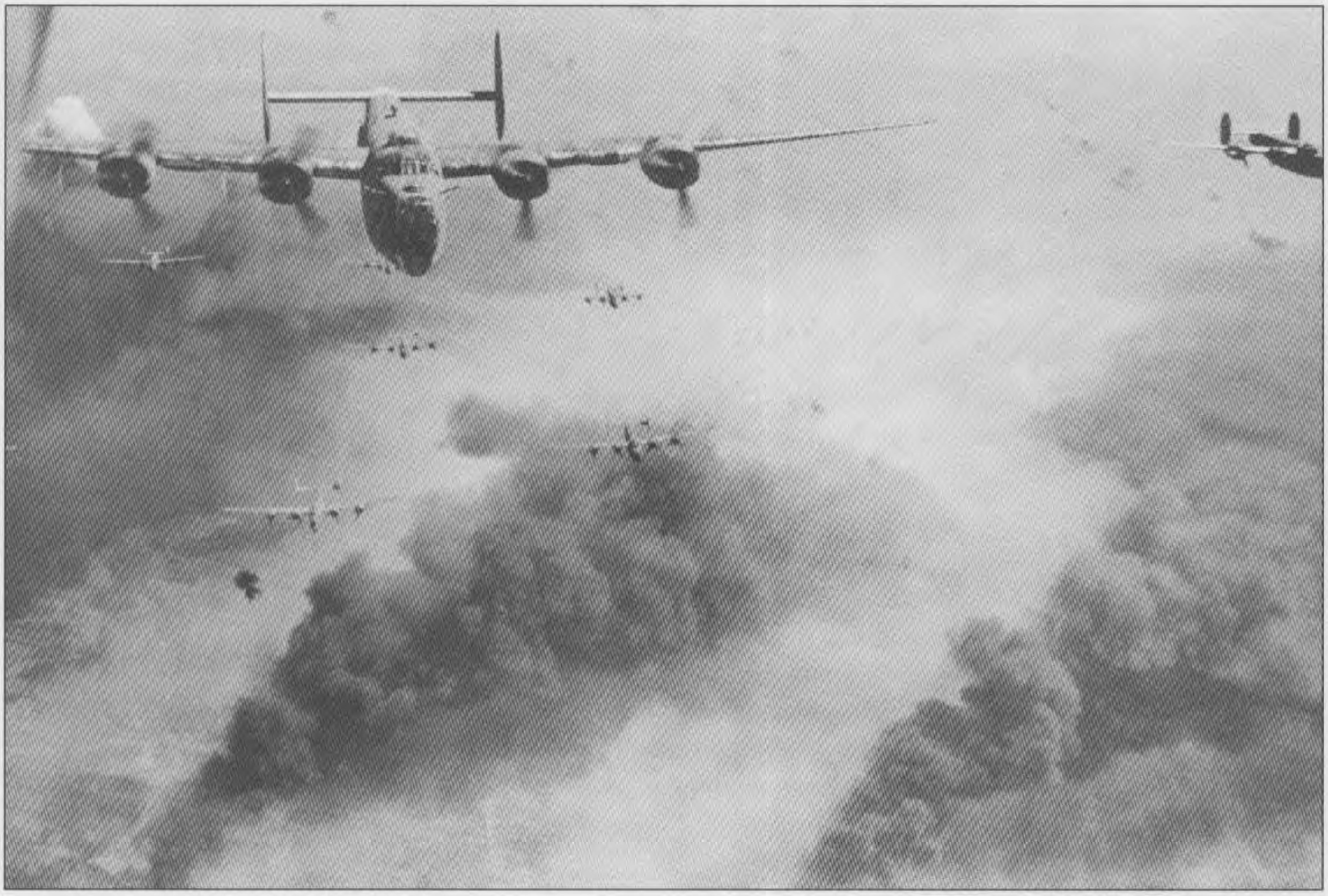
Meanwhile, the lives of Liberator crews remained intertwined with those of infantrymen stalled at the Anzio beachhead. The fate of a 756th BS/459th BG Liberator named *DELAYED ACTION* (B-24H-10-FO 42-52187) was described by Sgt Howard Haug, waist gunner on the bomber;

'It was Saturday, 27 May 1944. The target was Montpelier, France. We were scared but fairly happy because we were going to fly together as a crew, the way we had trained. The aeroplane they assigned to us was *DELAYED ACTION*, number 187 – old, olive drab coloured, dirty and ugly, but somehow pretty to us as she sat there on the hardstand. We had a substitute nose gunner named Nick Costa, who had flown twenty-some missions and had lost his crew along the way. Nick was an old-timer.

'We were about to go when our engineer, Ted McCormick, became sick with stomach cramps and diarrhoea. So they brought us a substitute

**This 376th BG Liberator crash-landed on the shores of the Adriatic in Italy after being damaged by German gunfire while on a mission. AAF Air Service Command technicians where brought in to repair the aircraft and lay a crude runway of pierced steel planking. The Liberator was subsequently flown out of its temporary landing site to fight again (*AAF via William N Hess*)**





**One of the best-known Liberator photographs of the war depicts the high-altitude attack on the Condordia Vega oil refinery at Ploesti on 31 May 1944. Ploesti is better known for the low-level strike of 1 August 1943 which preceded the creation of the Fifteenth Air Force. When the B-24s returned at high altitude the following year, their impact on Germany's ability to refine oil was considerable (*AAF*)**

engineer – another old-timer, Bob Widup. There wasn't a lot of conversation with these substitute crew members that day because it seemed that from the time we got up until we got close to France everyone was so busy there was no time for fooling around or being sociable.

'We had flown over the open Mediterranean for some time, and were getting fairly close to our target, when we lost oil pressure on number three engine. Pilot Ken Harrison feathered the prop, shut number three down and radioed the lead ship. They suggested we return to base since this was our first mission. From this point on, things just seemed to keep going wrong for us. After turning around, we overflew the island of Elba. They proceeded to put up some heavy and very accurate flak. Harrison decided to drop our bombs on Elba – right then! About this time, everything seemed to happen at once.

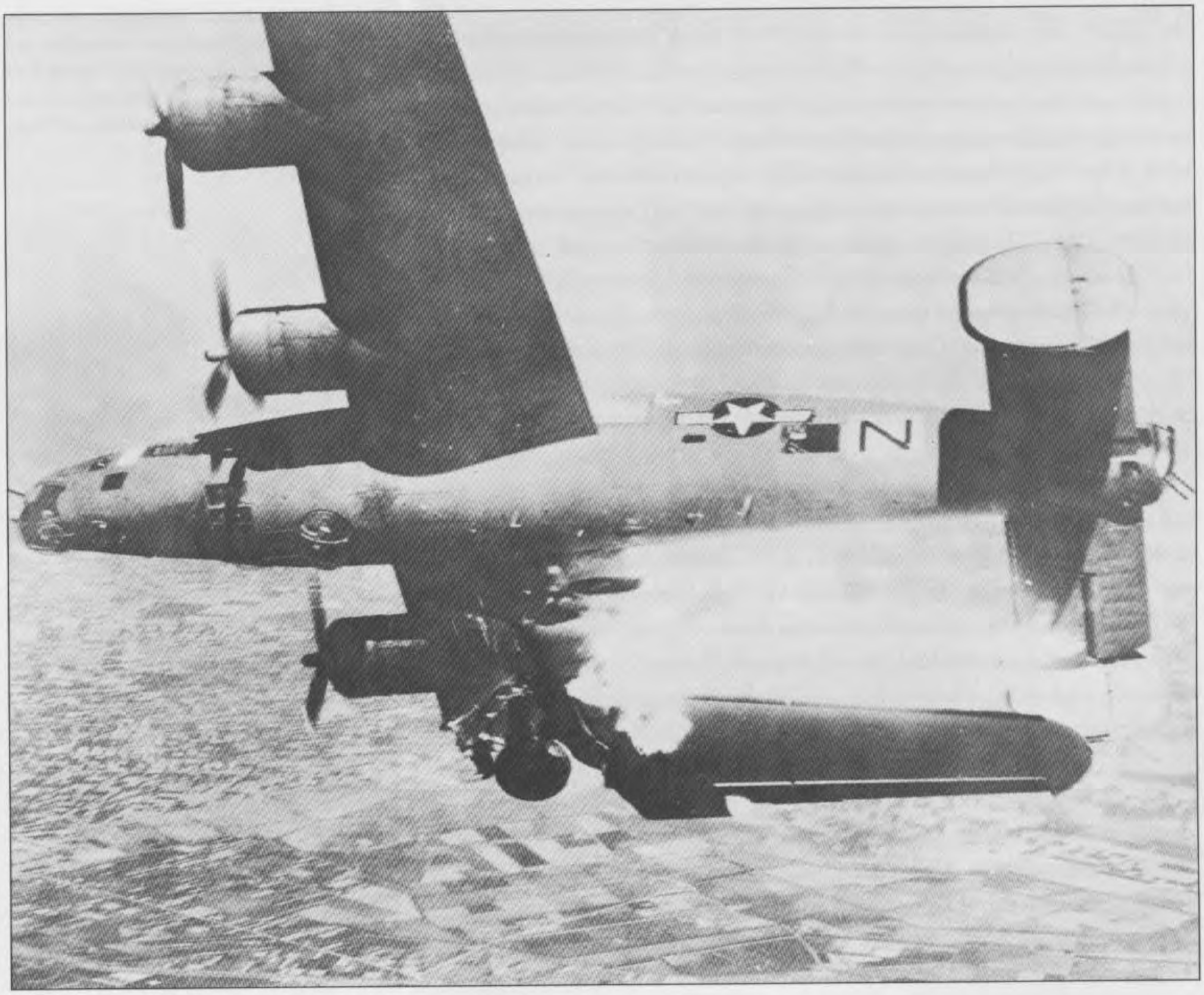
'A piece of flak hit our co-pilot, Norm Kraus, and broke one of his legs very badly. Our navigator, Charles Adams, got in the co-pilot's seat after Kraus was moved to the radio compartment on the flight deck. Our bombardier, Norm Apperson, and our radio operator, Jimmy Hinds, were working on Kraus's leg. We got out of there as soon as we could and headed down the coast of Italy in the general direction of Naples. But we had been shot up quite badly – number two engine had been hit and was burning now (not wildly, but no fire is a good fire on an aeroplane). It wouldn't go out, so Harrison feathered the prop and shut down the engine. Even so, the fire continued, but it didn't spread to the wing or elsewhere on the aeroplane – we had good luck on that score, at least. But we were now operating on the two outboard engines.

'By this time the crew had thrown all the guns, ammo and other loose items overboard because our altitude wasn't so hot. Our radio man was trying to find a landing strip as far north as possible. No one answered his calls for what seemed to be a very long time, and then the Anzio beachhead called and said they had a medical evacuation strip we could use. They would get it cleaned off if we wanted to make an emergency landing there. We decided to do that.

'Overall, we were shot up pretty badly. There were leaks everywhere, but we did have some hydraulics left, and our intercom was working. Harrison asked me to go back and see if the wheels had snapped into the locked position when they went down. I did so and called him so say that the wheels locked okay. In the meantime, in the waist of the aeroplane, nose gunner Nick Costa, ball gunner Harold Lindsey, tail gunner Hugh Workman and I were getting ourselves set for what we hoped would be a decent landing at Anzio.

'I don't know exactly what happened, but we hit something – a hill, or some rough ground – really hard. The aeroplane broke up and split apart between the waist and the bomb-bay, and caught fire. The four of us in the waist cut a hole in the left side of the fuselage. As we emerged from the fuselage, British infantrymen were yelling orders, running around, and putting us into foxholes, trenches and such. We must have crashed right where they were dug in to their defenses. Workman and I were put in a big hole together and the British went to work on our injuries while doing their other jobs.

**Another well-known portrait, this time of B-24L 44-49710 *STEVONOVITCH II* of the 779th BS/464th BG, which suffered a direct flak hit on a 'milk run' in 1944 (*AAF via Warren M Bodie*)**



'We were stunned by the violence of the crash and the speed with which these events were taking place – not to mention what had already happened that morning. I guess we thought that other than some cuts, bumps, bruises, broken bones and maybe some burns, everybody was getting out of the aeroplane at different places with the help of the British infantry. Sadly, our assessment of the situation was wrong.

'After a short time, the British troops got us out of there on stretchers, into Jeeps, and then onto the hospital ship *Leicester Liverpool.* We were placed on deck – evidently the enclosed areas of the ship were full. Looking around, we noticed our pilot and navigator were lying close to us. We could hardly tell it was them. They were all bandaged up and not moving.

'As it turned out, co-pilot Norm Kraus, bombardier Norm Apperson, and radio operator Jimmy Hinds were killed in the crash. Pilot Ken Harrison, navigator Charles Adams and engineer Bob Widup were seriously injured and were returned to the United States for medical treatment involving long hospital stays. Tail gunner Hugh Workman and I recovered from our injuries in Italy and were returned to flying duty. Both of us finished our tours of duty, although on the 13th mission he flew Workman had to bail out over Giulia Field and broke his ankle.

'Nose gunner Nick Costa was uninjured and promptly returned to flying duty only to be drowned after ditching on his very first mission after our crash (the other nine crew members of his ditched aircraft survived). Harold Lindsey was also uninjured in the crash of *DELAYED ACTION.* He returned to Giulia Field and got transferred to a groundcrew assignment.'

Often passing over or near Anzio in the process, Liberators continued a campaign against targets in southern France lasting several days in late May. Then they mounted another effort against Wiener Neustadt, this time with the intention of finishing off the city's capacity to build Bf 109s. 104 B-24s hit the assembly works, while a second force of 126 Liberators struck the nearby Bf 109 component factory at Atzgerdorf. Other bombers attacked the airfield at Wollersdorf.

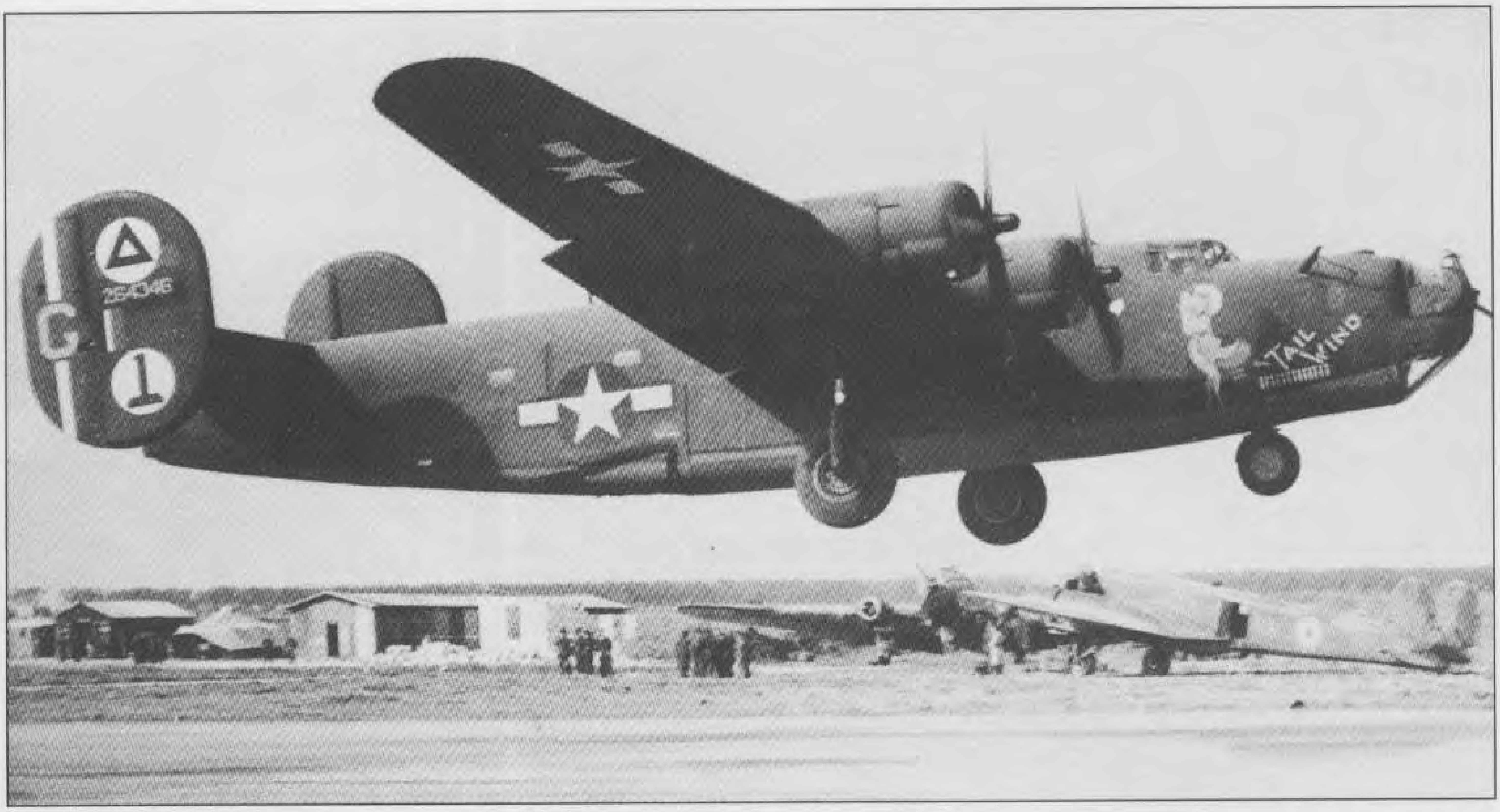
The three-pronged effort halted assembly of Bf 109 fighters entirely, but the Germans still had some capabilities around the city – a new visit on 30 May by no fewer than 481 Liberators neutralised these.

## INVASION

6 June 1944 (the date of the Allied landings in Normandy) had little direct impact on Liberator crews in the Fifteenth Air Force, but it did mark the first mission in the MTO by 1Lt Jack Stevens, a B-24 pilot who had arrived under an unusual exchange deal.

Stevens and his crew had already logged 13 missions out of England with the Eighth Air Force when a short-lived programme was put into motion to swap crews between the numbered air forces so as to spread combat-experienced personnel between the two theatres;

'So that they (Fifteenth) could have the benefit of my experience, my crew and I were transported aboard a luxurious C-87 Liberator "Express" to Casablanca. There, we were put aboard a Boeing 247 which took us across North Africa, with several stops, and continued up to Naples. The decision as to where we would be assigned was determined by combat losses. Based on that, we went to the 344th BS/98th BG, a very



***Tail Wind* was olive-drab B-24J-10-CF Liberator 42-64346 of the 344th BS/98th BG, and appears somewhat weathered in this early 1944 portrait of it departing Marcianise. Note the Co-Belligerent-marked Fiat BR.20 and SIAI S.81 transports parked in the background (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

experienced outfit which had deep-rooted procedures, both good and bad. On that first mission – on D-Day – we went to Ploesti. They sent us out with a seasoned pilot. He mostly observed. There was never any question about whether we were competent.

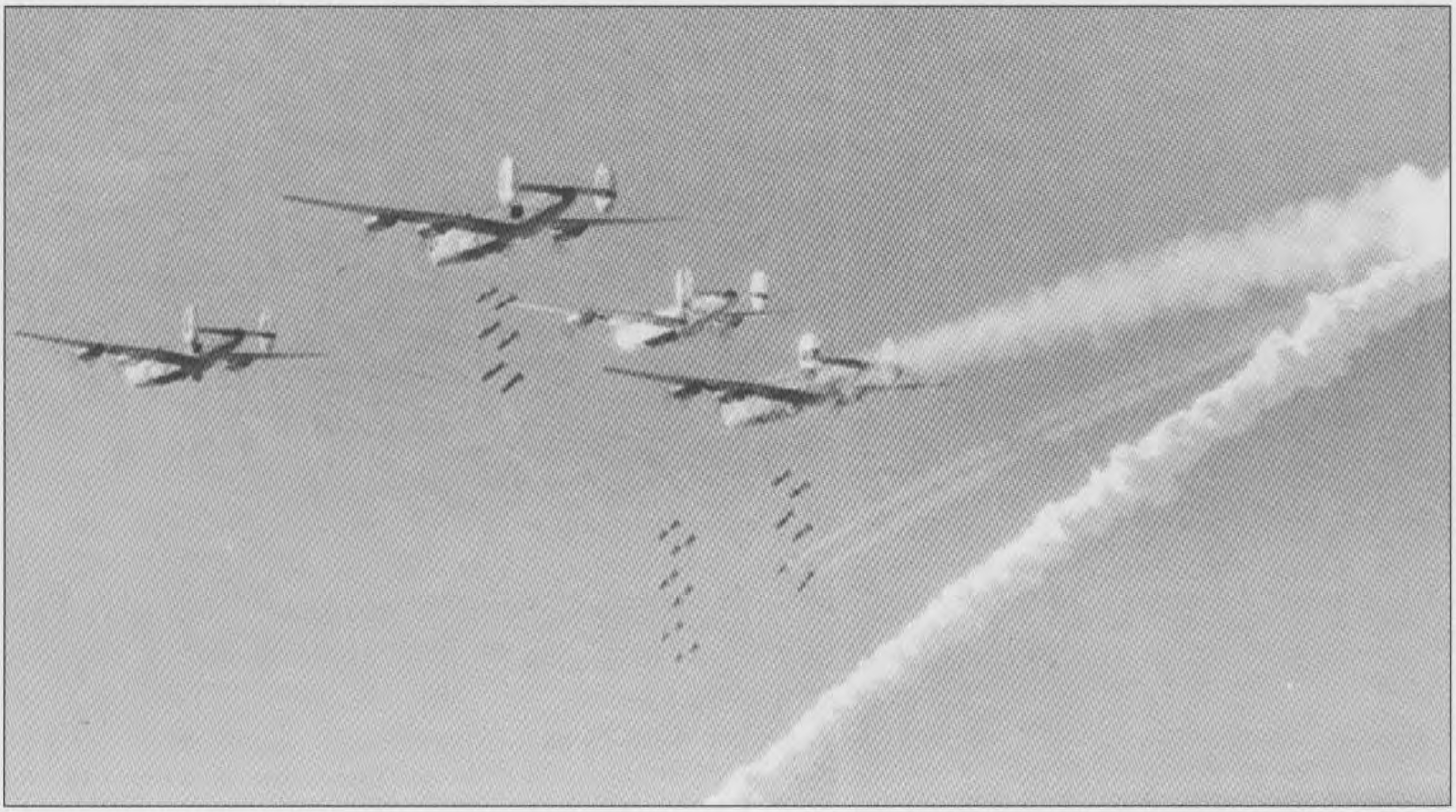
'Some time later, the 98th BG commander asked me, "How are things?" He also wanted to know which was rougher, Eighth or Fifteenth? I told him he didn't need to know that. I pointed out to him that, unlike the Eighth, the Fifteenth bombers didn't go on long bomb runs, remaining on course from the IP (initial point) onward. Instead, they used evasive action all the way in to release point. They did not use automatic pilot as effectively as we had in the Eighth. Furthermore, the Eighth Air Force was much more GI, much more military.

'In the Eighth, after every mission, there was a critique. All officer crew members went to the critique and went over the good, the bad, who was responsible, what happened. In later years I met a counterpart, a B-24 bombardier, who transferred in the other direction from the Fifteenth to the Eighth, and the existence of a post-mission critique surprised him more than anything else.

'People ask me my worst mission. I don't think I had any worst mission. We took off. We assembled. We went on course. We had flak. We had fighters. But we weren't really badly damaged on any of our missions. On one mission – can't remember which – a fighter came in on us from the side and I saw the bullets going past, and our guns were going off, and one of the gunners said, "That guy bailed out". I saw the German pilot's 'chute open. But it wasn't that bad for my crew. We went to Ploesti four times. They were just routine missions.

'There were a few targets that both the Eighth and Fifteenth hit – Munich was one – but generally the Fifteenth encountered fewer fighters at the time I was there. After D-Day the weight of their defences was going up toward Normandy. I had a lot more fighters out of England.'

Stevens apparently regarded Munich more matter-of-factly than his buddies did – from the start.



Fifteenth Air Force crews referred to the chemical smoke bombs used by the lead box in a formation to indicate the bomb dropping point as 'Skymarkers'. Here, the Pathfinder (the aircraft farthest to the viewer's left) has dropped its markers, leaving only smoke trails visible. Bombs from the remainder of the box are readily visible (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)

## MUNICH

Fifteenth Air Force bombers were given a new CBO target on 9 June 1944 when the three Liberator groups of the 49th BW took off to attack targets in and around Munich. The bombers became widely scattered during their approach to the target, complicating the escort task assigned to Mustangs of the 52nd FG. Despite initial confusion, the bombing was highly accurate and not a single friendly bomber or fighter was lost.

The Liberator was more important than ever now that the Fifteenth Air Force's B-17s were busy with shuttle-bombing, or *Frantic*, missions which required staging at bases in Russia to attack German targets. It is unclear why the longer-range Liberator was not chosen for this duty. Instead, it was Munich, again and again.

It was Munich on 13 June when the 484th BG went after the city's marshalling yard. As usual, the weather acted up, which prevented the B-24s from forming a solid, protective formation so the bombers were somewhat separated when 50 Bf 109s and Me 410s hit them on their way in. The Luftwaffe shot down four Liberators (or five, according to one source) in a running battle that seemed interminable to the bomber crews.

The group was supposed to bomb aircraft factories, and if they could not locate them by visual methods (as was expected), they were supposed to bomb the main marshalling yards in Munich using a pathfinder aircraft equipped with radar. The pathfinder lost an engine and had to drop out of the formation, so when they finally had the target in sight, smoke obscured the Munich marshalling yards. Unable to drop, and badly mauled, the Liberator formation swung eastward to hit a secondary target – the railhead at Innsbruck.

The approach to the new target became an unspeakable marathon of pain, with wounded men clinging to their guns and staying at the controls. The 484th BG bombed Innsbruck successfully and no further Liberators were lost as the group retreated to Torretto.

## *VIVACIOUS LADY*

On 13 June 1944 the 484th BG, headquartered at Torretta in southern Italy, earned the first of two Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations for flying a costly mission to Innsbruck. The group lost six B-24s on the raid, including B-24H-15-FO 42-94741 *VIVACIOUS LADY*.

'We were a good crew and we did some fancy flying', navigator 2Lt John Hassan remembered. Hassan had gotten his first taste of combat at Hickam Field, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941. He witnessed the destruction of the first Liberator lost in the war – a B-24A parked on the ramp outside the control tower where he was working as a radio operator;

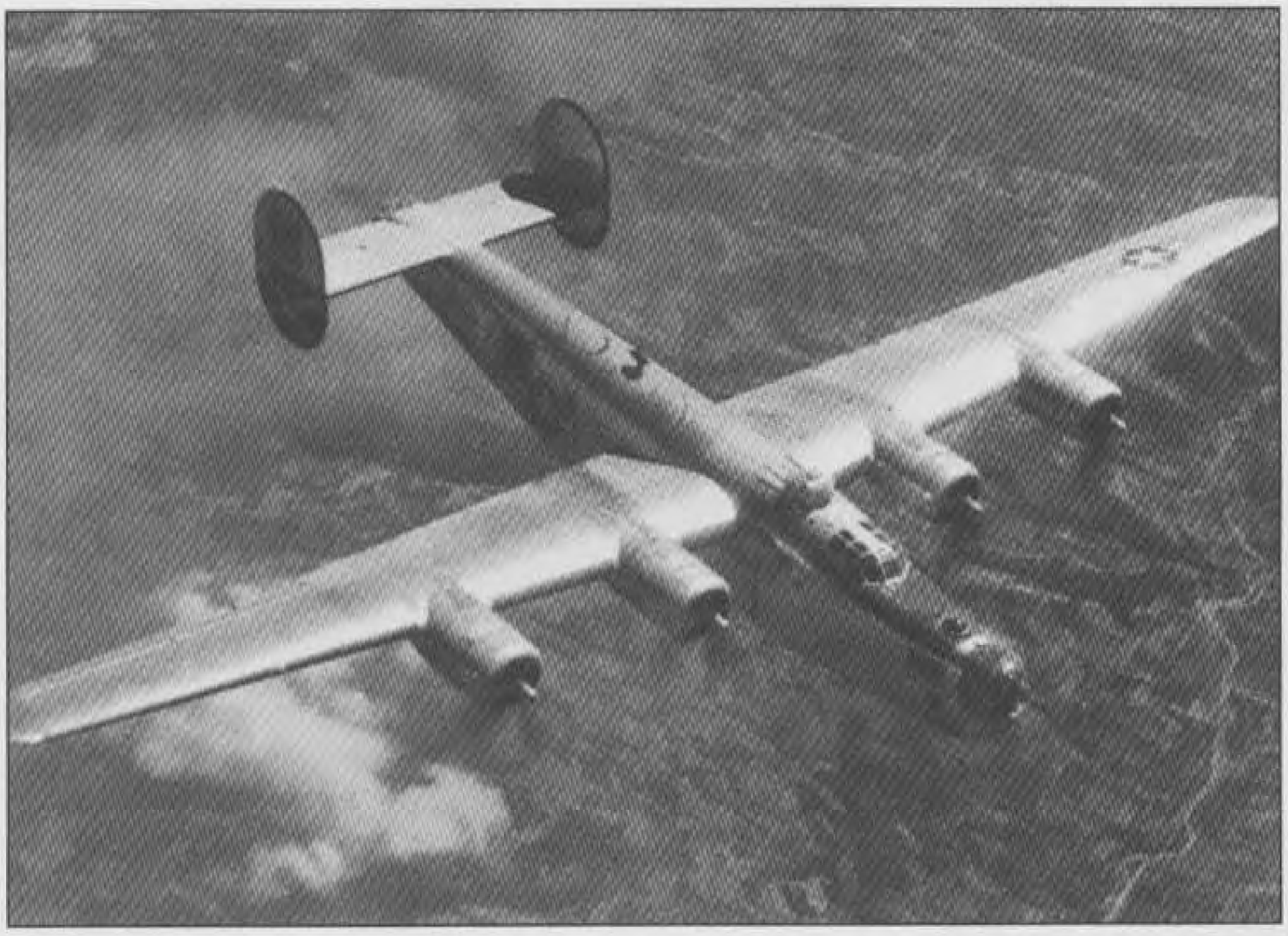
'We were in combat crew training at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho, and the base commander was Col John "Killer" Kane'. Kane had won the Medal of Honor for leading one of the groups that bombed the oil refineries at Ploesti in the famous low-level *Tidal Wave* raid.

'Training was almost as dangerous as combat. One snowy night we were on our take-off roll when we blew a main gear tyre at 65 mph (105 kmh). You normally don't survive something like that, but co-pilot 2Lt Richard Olson and our original pilot, 1Lt John Kelly, kept the aeroplane on the runway and under control and they finally got us stopped. Kelly mentioned to me that he was eating in the mess hall one night when Kane asked him what he thought of the training operation. "For one thing", Kelly told him, "The tyres on the aeroplanes are bald", and Kane replied, "Well, we'll see about that!" There's Col Kane with his Medal and John Kelly telling him to get some tyres for the aeroplanes!

'The longest leg on the trip to Italy was the 16-hour flight from Fortaleza, Brazil, to Dakar in West Africa', remembered Kelly. 'Hassan did a great job navigating across. I don't think we were more that a half-mile off course the entire trip'.

The crew only had 200 rounds of ammunition for their guns on the way over, mainly to save weight, although they did have special containers full of mail in the bomb-bay. When they got to Italy, John Kelly became co-pilot on an experienced combat crew. This was a standard procedure to break in new pilots, and get them used to formation flying under combat conditions. They could also become familiar with flak, fighters and survival procedures under the guidance of an experienced combat pilot. The new pilot assigned to *VIVACIOUS LADY's* crew was Capt Hugh Sheetz, one of the original members of the 484th BG. This group had been flying operationally for only a few days when Kelly and his crew arrived in Italy around 1 May 1944

On 12 June, Sheetz and Kelly were flight-testing a B-24 that had just had an engine replaced. The engine started to vibrate badly so they feathered the propeller, but it would not stay feathered. Eventually, the engine exploded and caught on fire. They saw Pantanella airfield below them so they decided to try an emergency landing, but were unable to get down fast enough to make a single straight-in approach so they overshot the runway, firing flares as they came in. The pilots then found that they did not have enough power to climb out so they pulled up the gear and belly-landed in a wheat field off the end of the runway. Shortly after the four-man crew climbed out, the aeroplane was totally engulfed in flames but no one was injured. Sheetz said, 'One of the crash investigators told me that he thought he could have landed the aeroplane, but he added that



This overhead view of a 489th BG Liberator emphasises its very thin, high-aspect Davis wing. Natural metal aircraft had a black anti-glare shield forward of the pilots' windscreen (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)

he might have gotten everyone killed, too'.

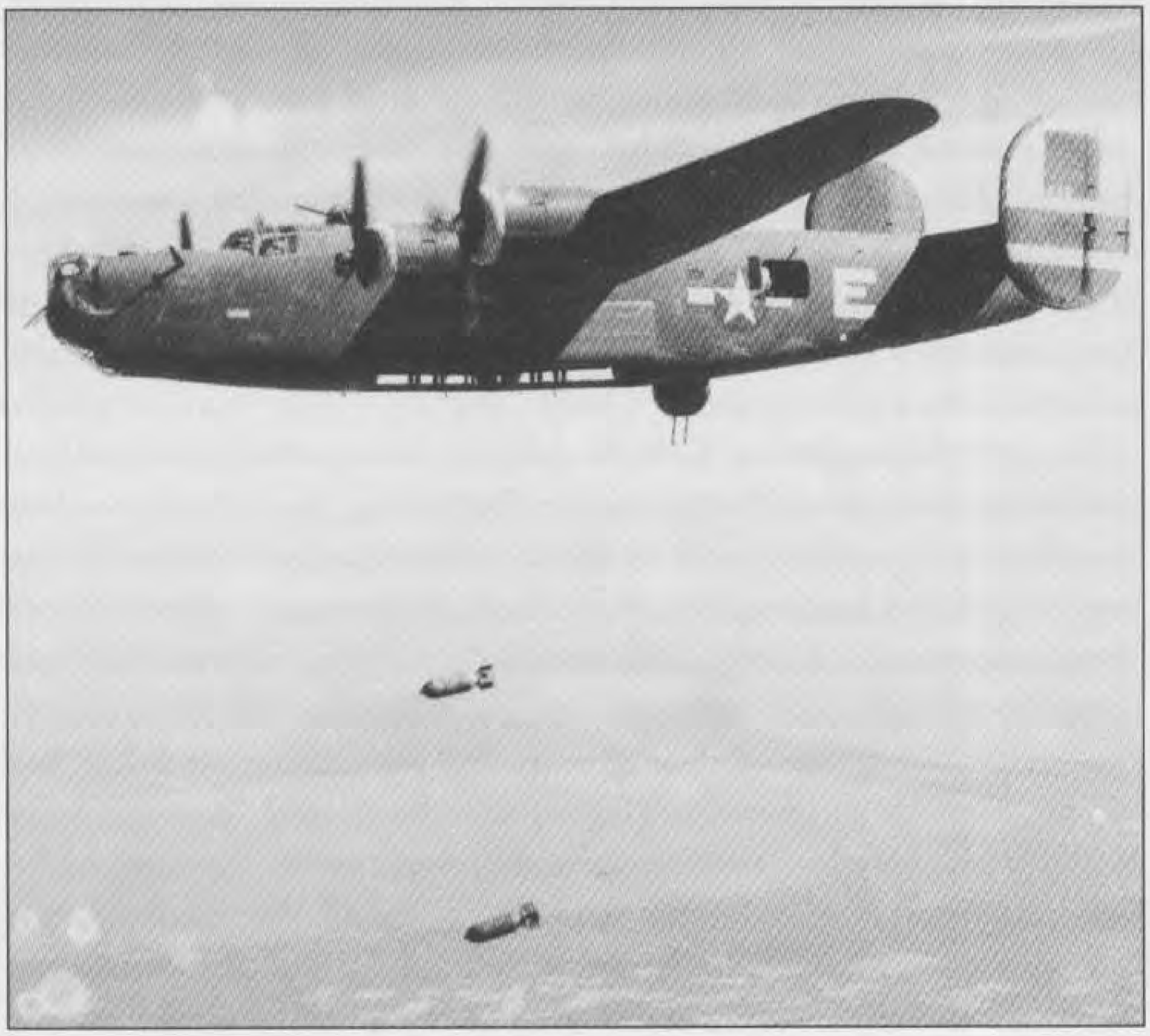
Because of the crash landing, Sheetz did not fly the 13 June mission to Innsbruck. Neither did T/Sgt David Brown, the original engineer on the crew, who was sick with the flu that day. Replacing them that day was 1Lt Robert Remington, pilot, and T/Sgt Frederick Howland, engineer. The other crewmen were the same ones that had been together all through training – co-pilot Dick Olson, bombardier 2Lt Walter Chapman, navigator Hassan, radio operator Sgt Bill Snyder, nose gunner Sgt Irwin Hansen, ball turret gunner Sgt Edwin Rogers, tail gunner Sgt Ralph Stokes and top turret gunner Sgt Alvin Houpt.

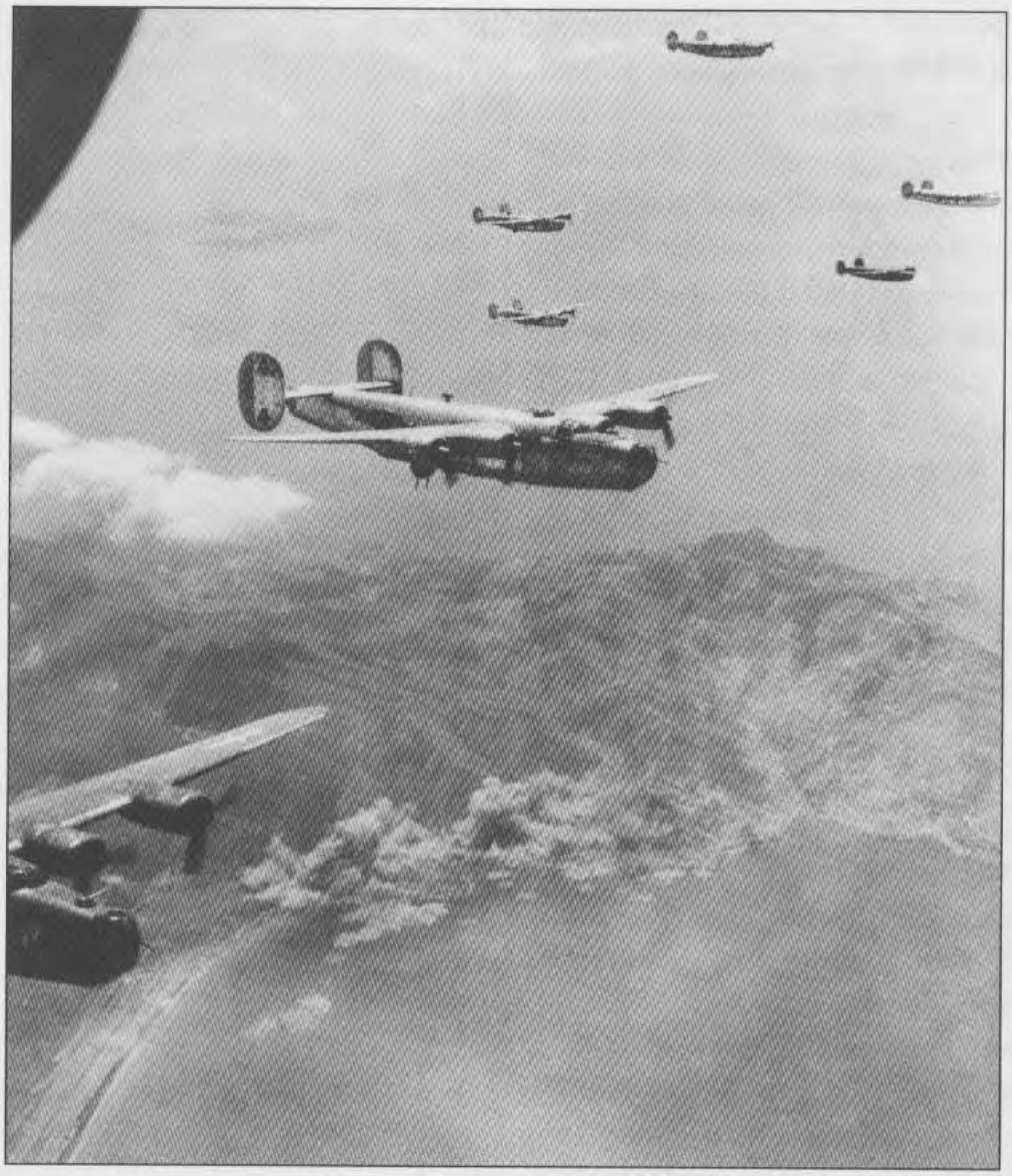
That day, the 484th BG sent 37 B-24s to bomb German fighter production facilities at Munich. The group lost four aeroplanes to fighters on their bomb run, although they were unable to bomb the target because of smoke screens that obscured it. They had to turn to their alternate target, the marshalling yards at Innsbruck.

On the way to Munich *VIVACIOUS LADY* lost its number one engine to mechanical problems and had to leave the formation, being unable to keep up with the group, which was still climbing. They made their turn to head back to base not long after clearing the Adriatic coast on the way north. Before they had even finished their turn out of the formation they were attacked by German Bf 109s. The enemy fighters had apparently been following the group, but were unwilling to face the concentrated firepower of the four squadrons. Hassan later said he saw at least eight Bf 109s attack his aeroplane. Chapman recalled that he was in the nose, calling out fighters as they came in from different directions;

'I called the first one out at six o'clock and I remember Houpt in the top turret yelling at Stokes to open up. He waited until the fighter was within about 300 yards (295 m) before he fired and the fighter just exploded in mid-air. As I recall, Houpt got one, and someone in the waist or ball turret got one, too. There may have been one other one that our nose gunner shot down. Snyder was a hell of a shot with a machine gun and he should be given

Bomb-bay doors open and ball turret guns facing directly downward, this 465th BG Liberator is seen delivering its ordnance on the marshalling yards at Forli, in Italy, on 19 May 1944 (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)





**The wartime caption for this portrait of the 450th BG at war tells us that these Liberators are pounding Nazi communications in Italy, including harbour installations, railway lines and highway loading facilities, and 'several small boats in the harbours'. However, it does not disclose the exact location of the raid, or the date on which it took place (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

credit for five aeroplanes while flying on our crew.'

Snyder, however, recalls that, 'I don't think I got five but I got a couple'. Records of the 484th BG give credit for one Bf 109 to Houpt, Stokes, Rogers and Hansen on the 13 June mission, while Snyder was given credit for one two days earlier on a mission to Giurgiu, Rumania.

As the battle persisted, Chapman headed for the flight deck to get his Mae West life jacket and parachute at about the time the bomb-bay burst into flames;

'No one told me to leave the nose but I knew we were gone. We were in a running fight that lasted about ten minutes and the fighters shot out two more engines and started a fire in the bomb-bay. Let me tell you, nothing will get you moving like fire. I opened the bomb-bay doors and put on my 'chute. I did not have time to get my Mae West on and we were over water when I bailed out. When I left the nose to go get my parachute, I'm sure Hansen was still firing his guns. Maybe if I had stayed there I would have been killed, too. I sat down on the catwalk in the bomb-bay and I could barely pull myself out of the aeroplane. Others on the flight deck were coming down right behind me, and between the kicking and yelling, they persuaded me to get out.'

'The Liberator was in a steep descent and I could not pull myself out either', Hassan recalled. 'I'm sure Olson pushed me out. That just shows you what happens when the chips are down. You get a big hand in the back and a shove from a guy named Olson. We still had our bombs on board and we were lucky they were 500-lb (227-kg) demolition bombs. If they had been incendiaries, I don't think we would have survived the fire.'

Houpt, in the top turret, had been hit in the legs and was unconscious. He remembered;

'Olson pulled the release on my seat and dropped me down onto the flight deck. That brought me around a little and I remember him telling me, "Al, we've got to get out of here". He got me down to the bomb-bay and he jumped from the aeroplane with me in his arms. He pulled my ripcord for me, too.'

In the waist, Snyder was trying to help Rogers, the ball turret gunner, who had apparently also been hit;

'I heard him say, "I've had it". I never heard him say anything else after that. The German fighters must have come up underneath us and hit him and Hansen too. I grabbed a handful of spent 0.50-cal (12.7-mm) shells from the floor of the aeroplane and threw them at the tail turret. Stokes turned around and looked at me. I pointed to the open hatch in the floor and jumped. Stokes told me later that he knew what I meant and that he came out right after me.'

Stokes reported in a later de-briefing that the bomb-bay was 'like a blast furnace'. He also reported that Olson said he saw 20-mm cannon fire bursting near the nose and that he thought some of the shells had hit the nose. The crew chief, Howland, must have jumped at about the same time as Stokes and Snyder. Hansen and Rogers never got out and fell to earth aboard *VIVACIOUS LADY.*

Olson told Sheetz in a conversation after the war that he did not pull his 'chute until he could see people walking around on the ground. He landed within a few hundred yards of some type of German garrison and was captured right away. He suffered shell fragment wounds to the leg and sustained a back injury that would not allow him to stand for several days. He said that Remington actually came down in the Adriatic Sea and had to float for five hours until an Italian fishing boat rescued him. He was turned over to the Germans and ended up in *Stalag III* along with Stokes, Snyder and Olson.

Snyder recalled later that he landed in a freshly ploughed field and before he knew it, a German soldier had a gun in his back;

'I had taken off my heavy electric boots and it was hurting my bare feet as we walked across the field to a road. A young Italian girl was riding her bike on the road and she asked the soldier if she could give me her wooden sandals. I wore those sandals right up to the time I got to PoW camp. I remember that Stokes was with me when they took our ID pictures. We sat together when they took our photograph and then they cut the picture in two. That way they only had to take one picture for the two ID cards.'

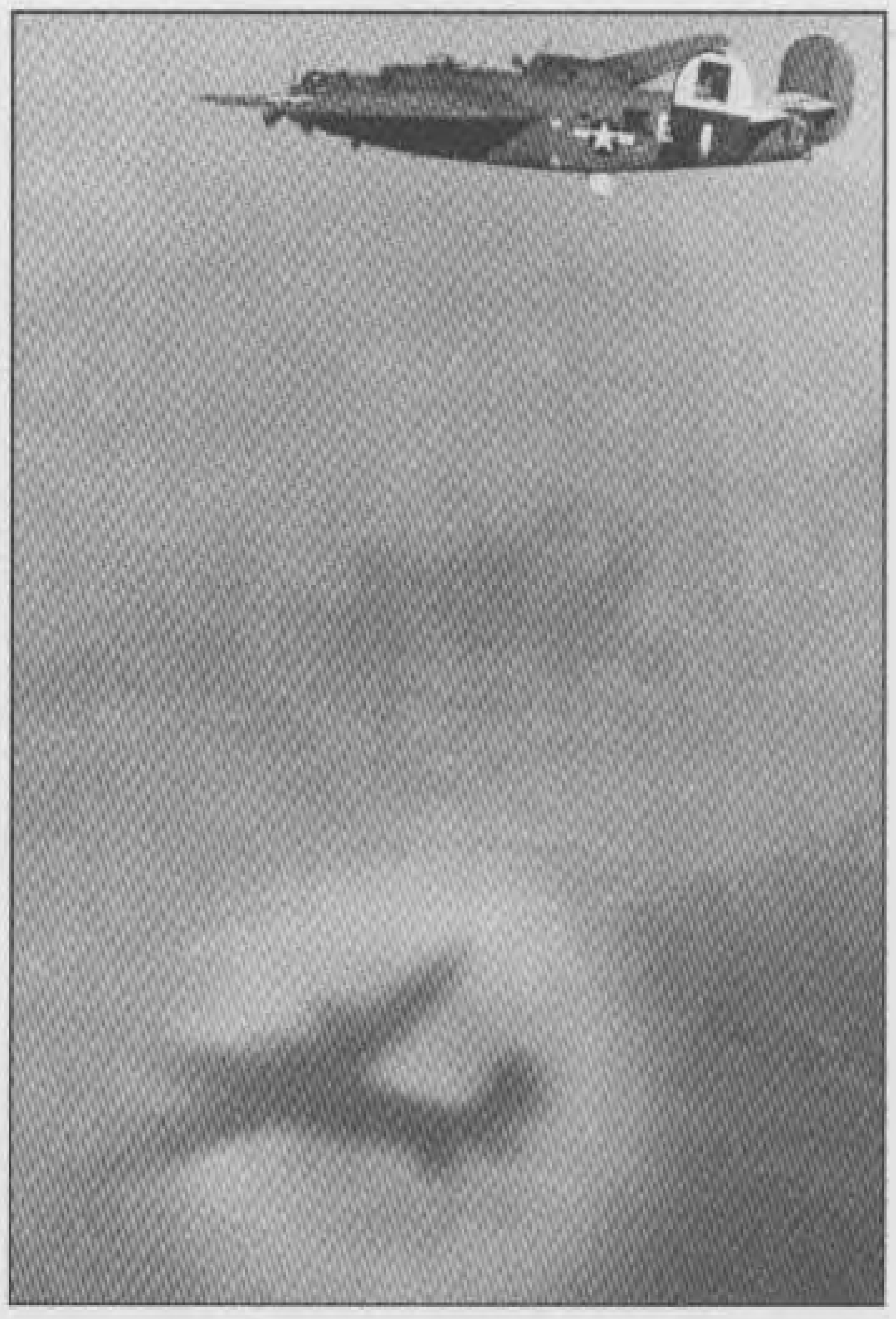
Chapman came down in a field where farmers took his uniform and gave him civilian clothes, as well as a bottle of wine and a couple of raw eggs. They took him to a cave-like hollow under a tree near a river where he studied his escape map;

'While I was there, another B-24 was shot down right over my head later in the day. He was at the tail end of a group that was headed south, returning to base. I saw some 'chutes but it didn't look like all of the men got out. The next day a man took me across the river in a boat and there was a man on the other side who spoke to me in English. He said, "You're one of those American flyers that was shot down yesterday, aren't you?" I said I was and the man said he knew where two of the other crew members were. The man took me to a farmhouse where Howland and Hassan were waiting.'

Hassan landed in a street in a small town called Gorgo;

'When I was coming down in my parachute, one of the fighters circled very close to me and I could see the pilot looking coldly at me, with his canopy slid back. I put my hands over my head to show him that it was the end of the war for me but he did not acknowledge me. I was afraid he would try to collapse my chute by flying near me and gunning his engine but he didn't. I saw our Liberator crash into the Adriatic and there was burning debris on the water where it went in.

'When I landed, I climbed a Mulberry tree and stayed in it until it got dark. When I climbed down, I hid in a ditch and after a while I heard a noise behind me. There was a man standing behind me with a pitchfork



**Seen here is a rare phenomenon called the 'airman's cross', this *Mickey* radar-equipped Liberator casting its shadow on a cloud during a radar bombing attack on a German ammunition factory in Palmanova, Italy. The bomber wears the markings of the 464th BG (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

and he spoke to me in Italian, which I could not understand very well. He took me to a farmhouse, and the next day Chapman and Howland were brought there too.'

It took the three men 48 days to get back to their unit, their escape being one of the great stories behind the loss of *VIVACIOUS LADY.*

What happened to those who did not make it? *VIVACIOUS LADY's* Rogers and Hansen were both killed aboard the Liberator, their bodies being recovered from the Adriatic and buried in local cemeteries. Hansen is now buried in the American cemetery in Florence and Rogers is buried in Houston, Texas. Hansen had had a baby daughter when he went to Italy and a son was born while he was there.

All members of *VIVACIOUS LADY's* crew were awarded the DFC for the mission to Innsbruck. Unfortunately, through a clerical mistake Chapman did not get his medal in 1944 like the rest of the crew. The US Air Force corrected the oversight on 23 June 2000 at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, when Brig Gen Jay Jabour presented Chapman with his medal in front of the museum's B-24.

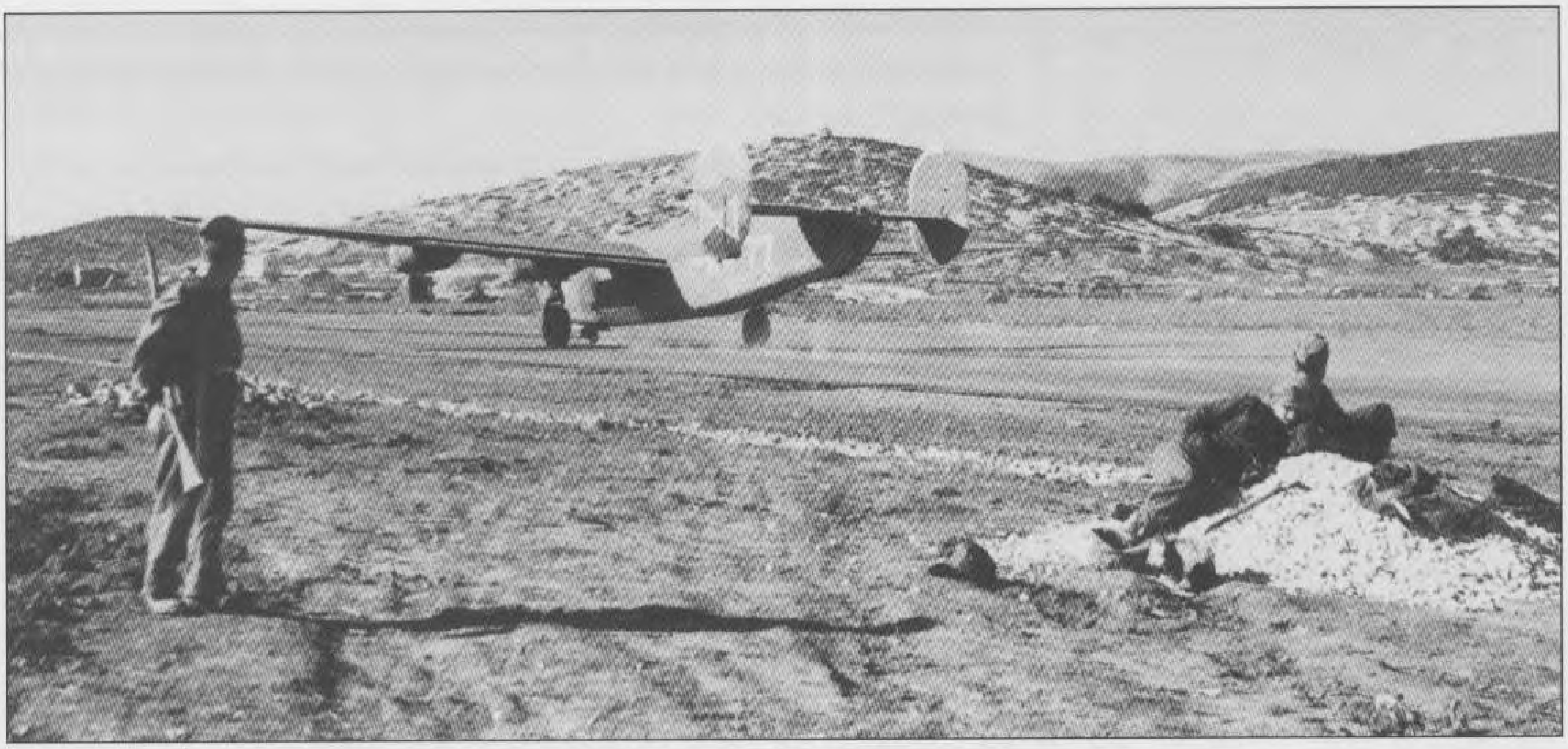
## BRATISLAVA

On 16 June 1944, the target was German oil refineries in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia (today, Slovakia), one of the largest petroleum-refining complexes outside of Romania. The 376th BG and other elements of the 47th BW entered a swarm of Bf 109s Bf 110s and Me 410s en route to the target, and one persistent Luftwaffe pilot rammed a B-24, causing both aircraft to be lost. Coming off the target, a brace of Ju 88s fired rocket projectiles at the bombers, then the Junkers heavy fighters closed in with guns blazing. Liberator crews shot down half-a-dozen fighters and exited the target area without losses.

These missions were being flown largely by newcomers who were learning as they went along. Just how new? 2Lt A E 'Pinky' Pinkerton remembers that he was still shaking American dust out of his shoes when told to fly the 25 June 1944 mission to Avignon, in France;

'We had arrived at Gioia del Colle depot from Tunis on 23 June 1944 in *THE ROVER BOYS*, a sweet-flying B-24G which we bought via the south Atlantic route from Topeka, Kansas. The operations officer at Gioia told us we would be there a couple of days while they removed the bomb-bay gas tank used for our Atlantic crossing. We would then be assigned to a squadron. About noon the next day we were told that plans had changed, and that we would be picked up within an hour, without our aeroplane, for assignment to the 759th BS/459th BG, based at Cerignola.

'It was a short hop. We didn't fly very high. I didn't even see the runway until we were touching down. We were met by a master sergeant who issued us tents, cots, tickings and blankets, and pointed to a couple of spots in the wheat field over near the vineyard for us to set up. We met our commanding officer, a major, who explained that we would have three or four days of ground and flight orientation before going on any missions. We got our tents up, trudged the muddy path to the mess tent for bully beef and C Rations, stuffed our tickings with wheat straw, and hit the sack. There were flashes in the northern sky which some of the guys claimed were from artillery. We hoped it was lightning.



Tyres squeak as a 484th BG Liberator comes to a stop on an emergency airfield held by Yugoslavian partisans in Dalmatia. Note the gun-toting militia men looking on (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)

'Long before daylight the next morning we heard the trucks plodding their way between the tents, horns beeping their irritating monotone. We could hear the crews' nervous joking and cursing as they waded through the mud to climb onto the trucks. As the drone of the truck engines died away, I easily slipped back to sleep with the confidence that I had a few more days before I had to do that and, what the heck, I thought, the war may be over by then.

'The dawn light was breaking when I was awakened by someone shaking me and saying, "Lieutenant! Lieutenant! Wake up! You're on today's mission!" I explained that he had himself the wrong Liberator co-pilot. I had just arrived and hadn't had any orientation or briefing. In fact, I hadn't flown more than 20 minutes of B-24 formation and had never made a take-off or landing. "You're Lt Puriton, 0832966, co-pilot on Lt Morgan's crew, are you not, sir?" the familiar master sergeant asked. "You are a substitute pilot with Lt Sikes' crew today". By then, I had decided that this wasn't a dream.

'I dressed as instructed and got into the Jeep for a jarring trip to the flightline. By dawn's early light I could see the crew stowing their gear while others gathered up by the nose wheel. One of the men was huddled

On 24 April 1944 this 460th BG Liberator suffered a serious flak hit in its number two engine and limped home across the Adriatic, trailing smoke, to Spinazzola airfield (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)

on the ground, covered with a couple of jackets and shivering intensely. Lt Sikes identified himself, and as we shook hands he explained that I was replacing the man shivering on the ground. It was not until after the mission that I learned he was suffering a malaria attack. In our brief conversation, I told Sikes, "I guess you know this is my first mission". He attempted to set me at ease immediately, but the wrong way. "I guess you know", he replied, "this is my second".

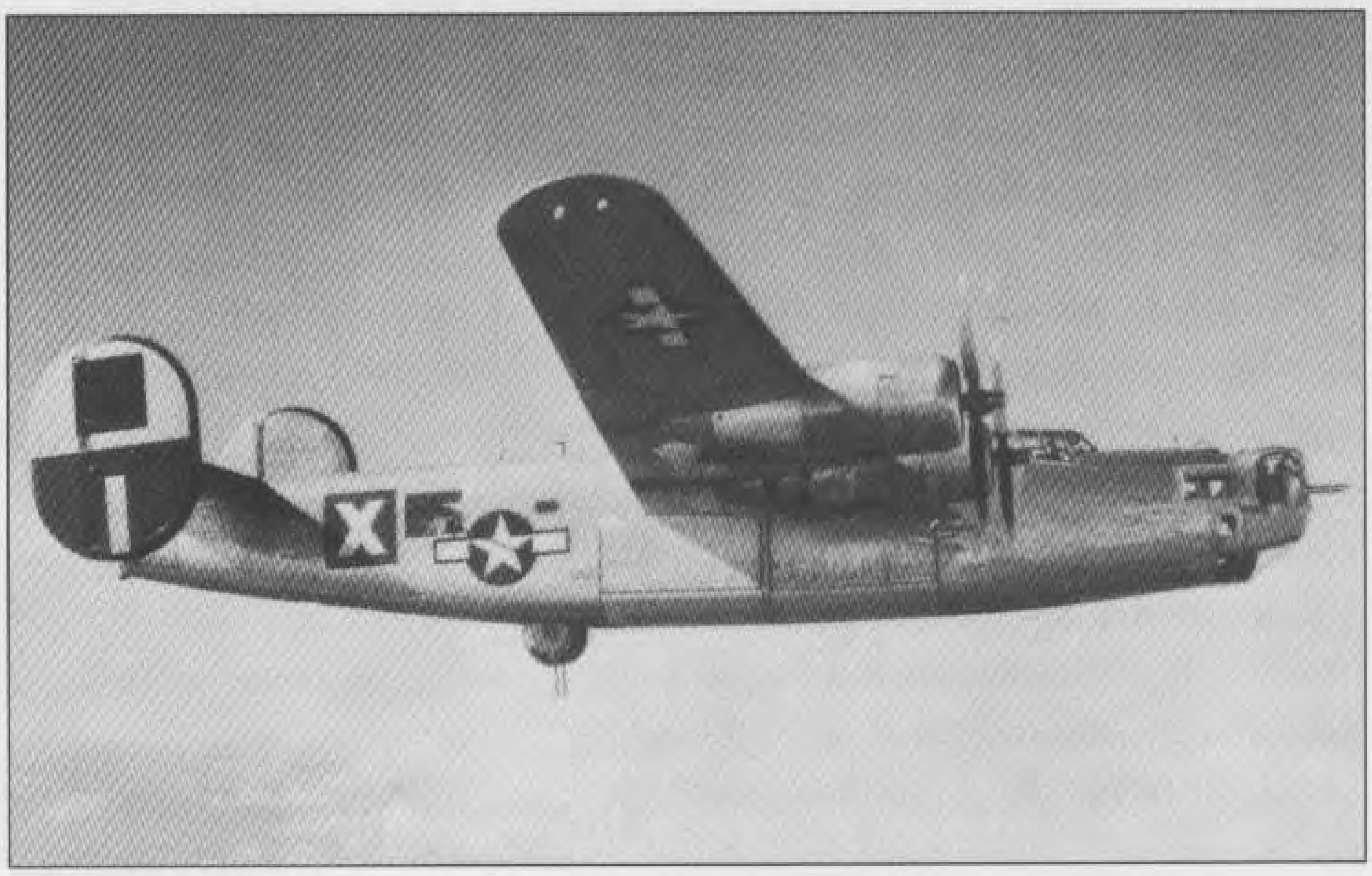
'I had never seen Lt Sikes, nor his crew, a ten-ship box formation, a four-box group, nor 500-lb (227-kg) demolition bombs, nor flak, nor Fw 190s, nor "Window", nor Bf 109s, nor flak, nor Avignon. I saw all of them that day, and from slot number ten – "Tail-End Charlie" – in the fourth box. I decided right then and there that if I was going to make it through, I didn't need to see much more of that. This meant I could not allow my mind to dwell on the distractions. The technique worked. In subsequent missions, I may remember dodging a few of those puffy black clouds, or hearing the chatter of the "fifties", or the crack of flak against the fuselage a few times, but my memory for details of the subsequent missions will never be as vivid as those of *numero uno*.'

## OIL AND MORE OIL

Liberators were sent against oil refineries around Vienna on 26 June. The 455th BG sent out 36 B-24s which ran into twin-engined Luftwaffe fighters approaching the target. Escort fighters dealt with the first wave, but more and more fighters appeared on the scene, firing rocket projectiles from a distance, then closing in, often in head-to-head attacks. A Luftwaffe fighter collided with one Liberator but the bomber remained stubbornly on course to drop its bombs on target and, only then, fell in flames. Two other bombers sustained damage, completed their bomb runs, then blew apart while still over the target. 455th BG gunners claimed 34 Luftwaffe fighters shot down, and damage to the refineries was judged as moderate.

As part of the 26 June effort, the 485th BG paid a visit to the Florisdorf oil refinery near Vienna, only to be greeted by 40 German fighters. The tenacious Luftwaffe was unable to prevent an unusually accurate bomb run – one which razed major sections of the petroleum plant. When the 55th BW went back to Florisdorf on 8 July, flak and fighters were plentiful as usual, but the bombing again went well. The 464th BG lost three Liberators, but claimed eleven Luftwaffe fighters. The 465th BG lost one Liberator and claimed seven German fighters.

Returning to Ploesti to strike the Concordia Vega refinery on 9 July 1944, the 449th BG used H2X radar, or *Mickey* crews, to help them see through clouds of machine-generated smoke that partly obscured the target. Flak claimed three Liberators during the approach to target. Surviving B-24 crews followed the



**Ball turret pointing earthward, a pristine Liberator of the 464th BG plies the high thin air over Europe (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

cue from radar Pathfinders and bombed effectively, despite the smoke.

On 30 July, the CBO target on Mission 35 (the numbering system emanated from Fifteenth headquarters) was Friedrichschaffen, Germany. Radio operator Sgt Walter L Heubner of the 828th BS/485th BG suffered a horrendous experience that included his tail gunner's demise. He described it in notes at the time;

'Our Liberator was hit by Bf 110s with rockets. The tail turret was completely blown off. The cockpit and nose turret were blown to pieces. Waist gunner Sgt Gordon Simpson checked out the nose and cockpit and found no sign of life. I bailed out first, followed by Simpson. I was wounded with shrapnel in my back. A young Italian (about 15) had a rifle on me when I hit the ground. The German SS arrived shortly after.'

Co-pilot 2Lt Robert Capitaens, who was flying his first mission, described the shoot-down of the same Liberator thusly;

'The mission was uneventful until we were at 14,000-15,000 ft. The first indication of trouble was a loud roaring sound, possibly the Bf 110s going overhead. The aeroplane was shaking and vibrating. I landed on my back against the ball turret mechanism. Also, I felt something hit my back and could feel blood – I still have a two-inch rectangular piece of metal in my back. The tail turret with Sgt Jimmy Fales in it was completely gone, with only oxygen and electrical lines hanging loose like spaghetti. I hoped that Fales was dead before the turret hit the ground.

'Simpson and I manually lifted the ball turret and Sgt Kevin McGovern got out okay. Simpson went to the cockpit and nose area and said it was really shot up in pieces and there was no hope, and as we were losing altitude Simpson said to bail out. I think pilot 1Lt Thomas Baker had somehow put on the automatic pilot.

'I jumped and lost my boots! I saw McGovern leave next, and I could also see the aeroplane in the distance on fire and going down. Simpson waited until it was almost too late and his 'chute barely opened and he landed in the water. Some Italians picked him up. I landed and found an Italian sticking a rifle into my face.'

251176
P
WELCOME HOME
GUY & BOY

**Top and above**
**In late 1944 Romania ended its alliance with the Axis and released over 1000 Allied airmen being held as prisoners – including veterans of the seminal 1 August 1943 low-level Ploesti mission. Other prisoners were released by Bulgaria, and in both cases, many of the airmen returned to Allied control aboard B-24 Liberators temporarily employed as transports. These photos show former PoWs of the 98th BG that were flown back to Italy by their old bomb group (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

Heubner and Capitaens became prisoners until war's end. As the Soviets advanced, they were moved from one camp to another. Their crewmates had suffered exactly the fates they suspected.

During the summer months, the weather was consistently bad, but the effort against German oil continued. On 26 July 1944, the 460th BG took 24 Liberators to Zwolfaxing airfield in Austria, where Bf 109s were final-assembled. Liberators fought through about three dozen Luftwaffe fighters only to arrive over a target obscured by clouds. Again, crews made a successful bombing run despite the obstacles, but three bombers were lost in the process.

As for the ongoing struggle over Ploesti, Liberators made their 14th high-altitude visit on 28 July. 349 bombers went to the target, and 20 failed to return.

## 9 AUGUST 1944 MISSION

1Lt Donald D Pucket, a pilot in the 98th BG, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during a mission against the nefarious Ploesti oil refineries on 9 August 1944. Just after bombing the target, Pucket's Liberator (B-24J-35-CO 42-73346) was crippled by anti-aircraft fire and crew members were wounded. He calmed the crew, administered first aid, surveyed the damage and, realising it was impossible to reach friendly territory, gave the order to 'abandon ship'. Refusing to desert three men who were unable to leave the bomber, Pucket stayed with the aeroplane. He was still at the controls when it crashed on a mountainside.

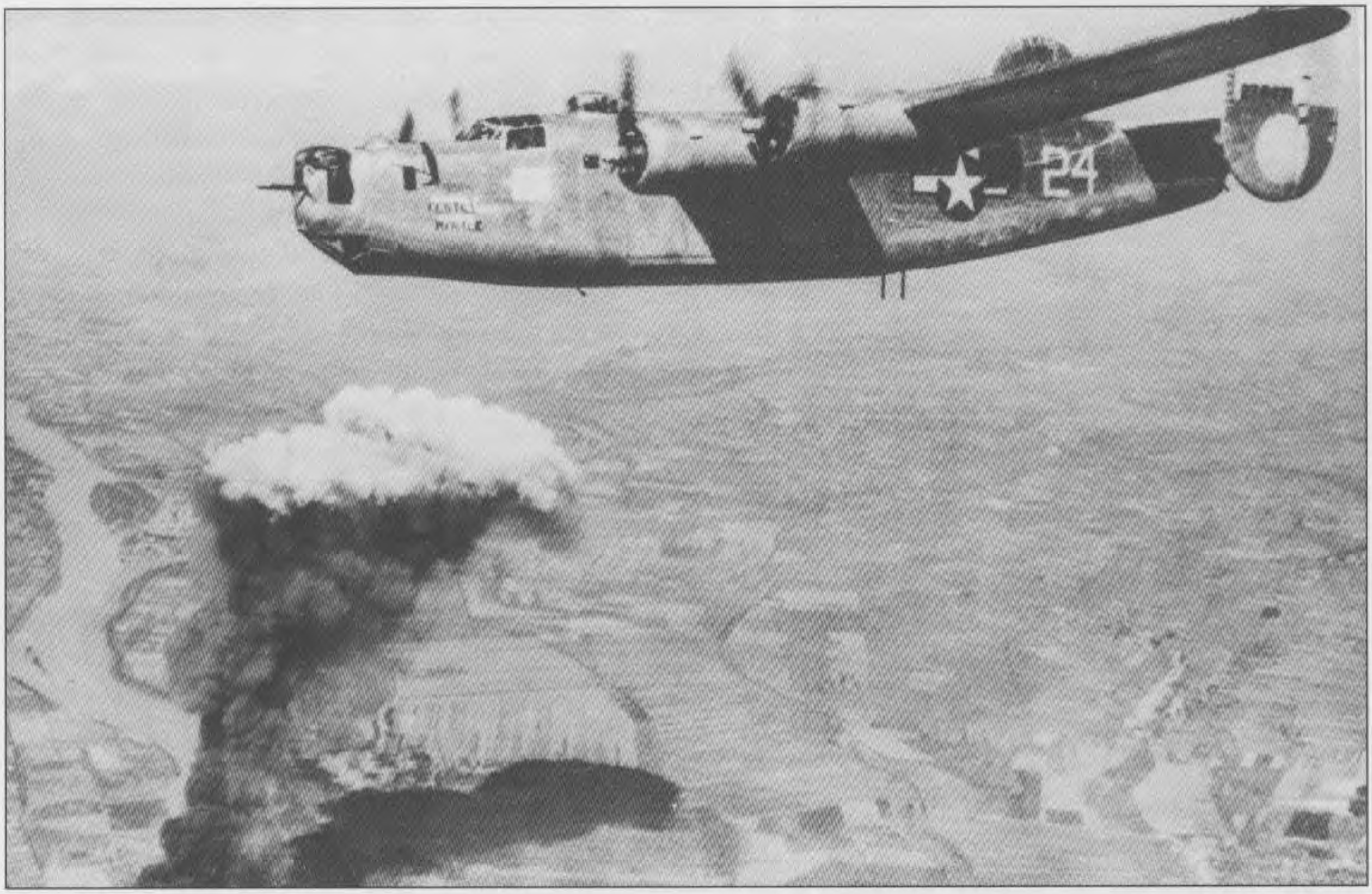
Six days later Operation *Anvil* (the Allied invasion of southern France) commenced. This was an event for which B-24 crews had been building since earlier in the year. Liberators were overhead on the day of the landings, too. The weather was worse than ever in August, and every one of the *Anvil* support missions was a challenge.

The newly-formed 885th BS sent forth 11 Liberators on 12 August 1944 to drop supplies to French resistance fighters (*Forces Francaises de l'Interieur*) who were undermining German resistance to the landings. This squadron was unique in performing what would be known today as special operations duties. The drop of 67,000 lbs of arms and ammunition that day was only part of what the 885th BS did, for it also dropped agents and leaflets. This unique squadron did not belong to a group, and its commander reported directly to the boss of the Fifteenth Air Force.

This was not the only Liberator outfit to fly special missions. The 859th BS at Castiglioncello was officially known as the 'Spooks' and, like the 885th, worked for the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). Again, their job was to drop agents and carry out other unconventional duties.

Other Liberator targets in mid-August included Genoa and Toulon. On 16 August (the day after the landings in France) Liberator crews were sent to bomb bridges – a difficult task for which the bomber was not well-suited – and the results were mixed. Once the *Anvil* beachhead was established, bombing operations resumed their former tempo, and on 17 August Liberators went to Ploesti again. Two days later, they flew yet another strike on Ploesti, with limited fighter resistance.

In the end, of course, the best-known Liberator target of the war succumbed not to the Consolidated bomber but to the long shadow of the Red Army. With Soviet troops on the offensive, Romania surrendered



**A conventional bombing attack could sometimes produce a giant mushroom cloud. *FERTILL MYRTLE* was a North American B-24G-16-NT Liberator (42-78471) that apparently belonged to the 724th BS/451st BG, and its target was the oil refinery at Almas-Fuzito, in Hungary (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

on 23 August 1944. German forces in Romania fought on despite the surrender, so on 26 August Liberators bombed a Wehrmacht installation near Bucharest. By the end of the month, the Red Army had overrun both Ploesti and Budapest. This was good news for 1100 American airmen, including around 600 Liberator crew members, who had gotten to know Romania all too well but, now, were no longer PoWs. Most flew as passengers on B-17s brought into Bucharest on the first leg of their journey to safety. Meanwhile, Fifteenth bombers flew every day in the last two weeks of August, including a trip to Vienna by 39 Liberators on the 22nd.

## SEPTEMBER 1944

The capitulation of Romania altered the picture considerably for Liberator crews. No longer would they carry bombs to Bucharest and Ploesti. But Liberator missions were in the air for 20 days in September, mostly against other targets in the Balkans.

The following month, deteriorating weather meant that B-24 crews could fly only half the days on the calendar, although this included difficult visits to Munich and Vienna.

On 7 October, Liberators of the 450th BG flew Mission 151 against Winterhofen, in Austria. Bombardier 1Lt Everett Frank of the 721st BS/450th BG remembered;

'Just like on many other days in southern Italy, we were awakened at about 0500 for briefing. The night before, crew rosters were posted and we knew it was a maximum effort because 55 crews were listed to fly and our normal was 28 aeroplanes (four squadrons of seven aeroplanes each).

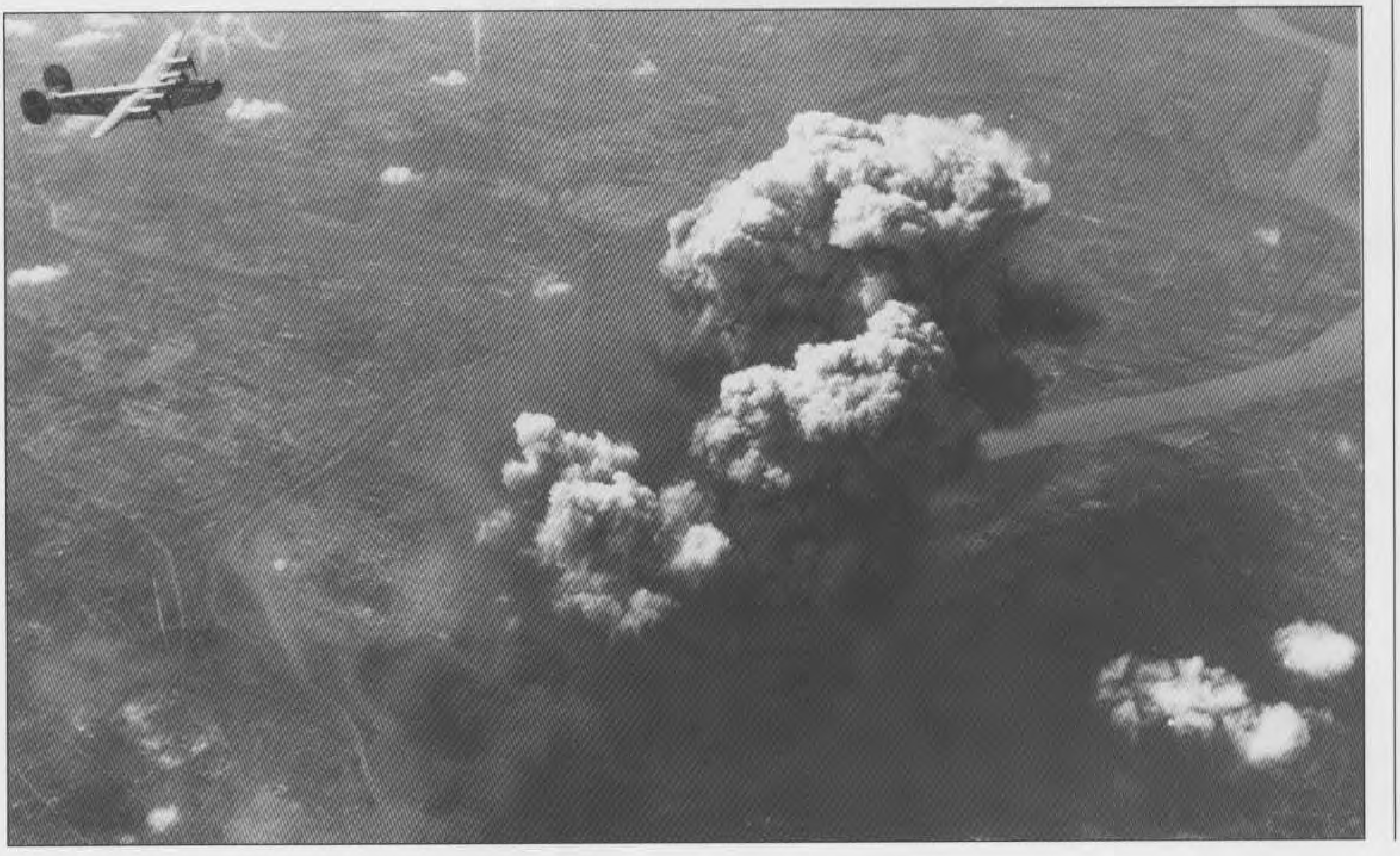
'The officers sat in the briefing room with a din of noise, everyone talking and wondering where we were going. Silence fell over the room as the briefing officer walked up to the wall map covered with a huge window shade. As he hooked the pointer to the ring on the shade and slowly raised it, we could see the red tape, which showed the route to the target, going up and up and finally ending at Vienna. You could hear the faint groans from the men. The target was Winterhofen Oil Depot on the Danube, and we were to attack from 23,000 ft – kind of high, as we usually flew about 21,500 ft.

'Take-off was to begin at 0845, and we would rendezvous with the 98th BG at 1014 at San Vito. We picked up 30 P-51 escorts at turning point Buc at 1200 and proceeded to turning point Kotoriba, where rendezvous was made with 55 P-38s at 23,000 ft. We continued on to the Initial Point. The bomb run was made on an Axis of 248 degrees. The gunners in the waist started to dispense chaff. This was bundles of foil-covered paper similar to the tinsel you hang on Christmas trees. It didn't help you, but it confused the German radar and helped the aeroplanes in groups following you.

'Usually, I kept my heated suit turned up to a reading of 10 at about 15,000 ft. I would gradually turn it down until by the time we reached the IP, I would have it unplugged and my shirt collar opened. This day we were toggling on the leader and I didn't have much to do. Under these circumstances I would usually watch the ground for the AA guns to start firing. They looked like little clusters of sparklers going off in groups of five or six. At that time the sphincter switch really tightened up and I would call out to the crew, "Be ready! It's coming!" It took about 30 seconds for the shells to reach our altitude. The first few burst usually gave you a good indication of how accurate the flak was going to be. That was a long 30 seconds.

'The first burst this day told us we were in for a rough 20 or 30 minutes. It burst off our right a couple of hundred feet and right at our altitude. I was the bombardier and didn't have much to do except to watch for the

**Palls of thick smoke rise thousands of feet into the sky as a 464th BG B-24 cruises past the target at 21,000 ft (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**



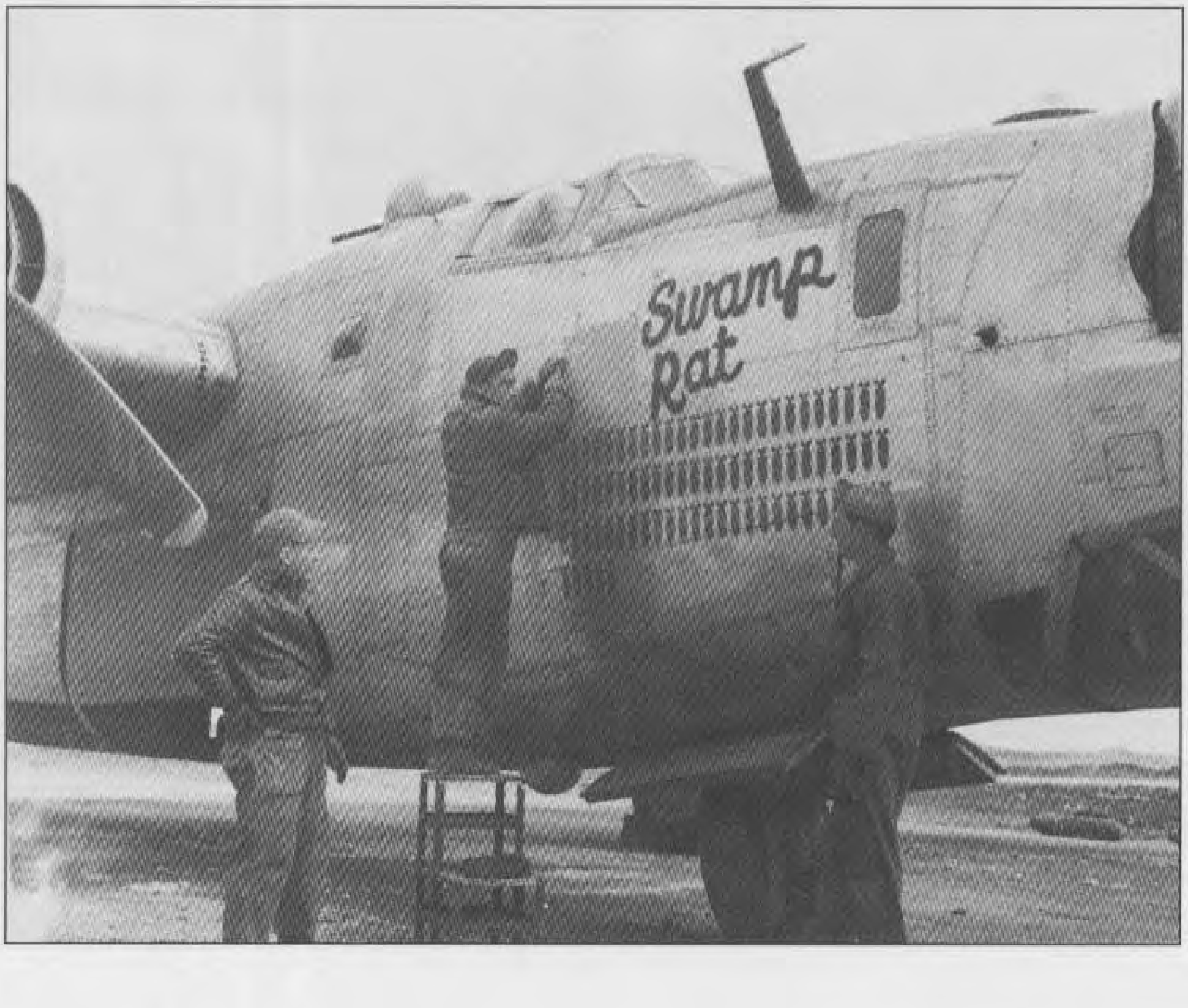
leader to drop and hit the toggle switch, as I had already set up the intervalometer. What was I doing? Hiding between the nose guns' ammo boxes and trying to get my knees inside my helmet.

'The mission report later said, "Flak: Over the target, intense, very accurate and heavy flak of undetermined variety was encountered resulting in damage to 27 aircraft. Black bursts were predominate and a few white bursts were observed". I can assure you they didn't overstate the situation. When I yelled "Bombs Away! Let's get the hell out of here!" the pilot, 1Lt Charles "Andy" Andrew, called on the intercom. Then there was a pause. A very unnatural and scary pause.

'Then Andy cried out, "Frank get the hell up here Rhea is hit!" He meant Charles Rhea, the co-pilot. I grabbed my parachute and headed for the flight deck. I got on oxygen and stood behind the console. Andy was in the process of feathering an engine and Rhea was slumped over the yoke. The radio operator, Ron Argust, helped me pull Rhea back off the yoke so Andy could pull the nose back up. Rhea regained semi-consciousness and we got his leg over the console and we finally got him onto the bench on the flight deck and hooked him up to oxygen He was relatively comfortable, but was in a highly emotional state. He thought we might bail out and leave him. We finally got him hooked up to the intercom and that relieved a lot of his anxiety. He then asked a simple question that I will Never forget. He said, "Andy are you going to get me home?" His voice had a pathetic ring to it.

'Andy replied, "What the hell you worrying about we aren't in any serious trouble". After we got Rhea on the bench I took my side cutter pliers and cut through his heated suit and pulled away his clothing. There was a big ugly hole in his right side. A piece of flak had penetrated the co-pilot's fuse box and entered his side. The co-pilot wore a backpack parachute and had the habit of just draping his flak suit over his shoulders without fastening the sides. The flak entered his side where he didn't have it fastened. Andy used to sit on his and pull it up between his legs as he had gotten married just a few weeks before we left the States.

'When I got most of Rhea's clothing cut away I opened a package of sulphamilinide and dusted it into the wound on his side. I was amazed because there was hardly any bleeding, but of course it was way below zero and blood coagulated pretty fast. I then examined his chest and saw a big ugly wound just below his heart. It looked like a big clot of blood in the wound. I touched it with my finger – it was very hard, and I took it between two fingers and wiggled it until it came loose. I pulled on it and it came out. It was a piece of shrapnel about an inch-and a-half long and approximately a half-inch square. I put it in my jacket pocket and saved it.



**A true MTO strategic bombing veteran, *Swamp Rat* (42-78454) was the last of 122 North American-built B-24G-16-NT Liberators. It was assigned to the 721st BS/450th BG, which operated from Manduria, Italy, throughout the war. The groundcrewman on the step ladder is masking up a swastika template on the aircraft, gunners from this bomber having been credited with at least three kills at the time this photograph was taken in late 1944 (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

The vast flat expanse of Manduria airfield was blanketed with snow in late 1944, although this had little effect on the operational tempo of the 450th BG, which operated from the base. Three P-38 Lightnings, a solitary C-47 Skytrain and a B-17G Flying Fortress can be spotted in amongst more than two-dozen B-24s in this panoramic view, taken from the airfield's control tower (*AAF via William N Hess*)

'I poured more sulpha in the wound. Remember this was before penicillin and antibiotics. We tried to give him a shot of morphine, but he wouldn't let us. He was still afraid we would bail out and leave him.

'We hadn't admitted it to the wounded co-pilot, but this was an emergency. We had lost a lot of altitude and were alone. We didn't think there were a lot of Luftwaffe fighters lurking out in the distance. We had another worry, for Andy's first concern was getting us over the Alps.

'Don't think for a minute that flying that B-24 is easy. It's hard to keep that aeroplane on course, and harder still to maintain an exact altitude. I slipped into the co-pilot's seat to try to help. By the time we got settled down, we had lost considerable altitude. The engineer (Joe Hornyak) had pretty well determined the extent of the damage – nose wheel tyre flat, one engine feathered, only partial throttle control on another engine, hydraulic system knocked out, tail damage resulting in partial control, plus multiple holes. I took over the co-pilot's seat, and performed his duties to the best of my ability.

'We decided to attempt to make Bari where the 25th General Hospital was located. The trip to the Bari area was rather uneventful. Our plan was to hand-crank the gear down and lower the nose wheel manually We called the Bari tower and asked for permission to make a straight in approach. The engineer hand-cranked the gear down and lowered the nose wheel manually. The engineer notified the pilot that he wasn't sure if the left gear was locked down.

'Our plan was as follows – I would pump the flaps down with the hand pump to the right of the co-pilot's seat on the approach using the hand pump. Andy said he would slip the aeroplane in against the left wheel and try to lock it, and when he hit the ground, he would signal me and I was to cut all the main engine switches to reduce and possibility of fire if the gear collapsed.

'We were coming along fine on a straight in approach at about 4000 ft when all of a sudden we saw a B-17 flying the pattern on the down wind leg. It was the only time in my 35 missions that I ever saw Andy get excited. He was in contact with the tower and he yelled, "Get that SOB out of there or I'll land on top of him! I can't go around! Get that SOB out of there!" The tower was shooting red flares and the B-17 pulled up and went around. Andy slipped the aeroplane in against the wheel and apparently the gear locked. I hit the switches and cut all power. He held the nose off as long as he could and braked to a stop. He had enough pressure in the accumulator for one application of brakes.

'As we rolled to a stop at the end of the runway an ambulance met us and took Rhea to the hospital. He recovered in several months and went home. No internal organs were perforated, the shrapnel following the flak suit on the inside of the muscles. During the landing Andy told the crew it might be rough, but unselfishly radio operator Ron Argust, laid across Rhea so he wouldn't be thrown around in case of a crash landing.

'They towed the aeroplane off the runway and the rest of us sat under the wing until they called our base, who sent a two-and-a-half ton truck up for us. I think we got home about midnight. That aeroplane never came back to our field.'

Pilot Andrew and bombardier-cum-co-pilot Frank were both awarded the DFC for the mission.

## INTO NOVEMBER

An innocuous 18 November 'milk run' lies at the core of the story of Liberator nose gunner/armourer Jim Mund, who may be unique in being shot down once and still continuing to fly combat;

'We were sent to the Fifteenth Air Force in early 1944 as a replacement crew. In fact, our crew itself was made up of guys who were in a pool at Charleston Army Air Field, South Carolina. My original crew crashed coming back from a practice bombing run over the Caribbean, flying out of Havana for a few days, and they broke up the bunch of us that were left. Back at Charleston, they made up a couple of crews from us "casuals" and sent us to Italy.

'We took a factory-fresh Liberator (I think it was a B-24L) over to the 763rd BS/460th BG – part of the 55th BW – based near Spinazzola. In our outfit, the new ships went to old crews (seniority had its privileges) and we spent most of our early missions in an old, olive-drab box-car named *OLE REPULSIVE*. It had a picture of Mammy Yokum (a cartoon character) smoking a pipe painted on the nose.

'Our first serious problem happened on our 25th mission (at that time, we were on the 50-mission, 35-sortie schedule for rotation). We were bombing Oswiecim, in Poland (better known as Auschwitz after the war), and lost an engine over the target. We straggled most of the way home. We passed close to Split, where the Yugoslav partisans maintained a secure emergency landing strip, but our pilot said he didn't want it on his record that he lost an aeroplane, so he tried for Italy. We almost made it. We ran out of gas, and were down to two dying engines, when we bailed out. We could see the Italian coastline.

'Three men drowned in the Adriatic, but the rest of us were picked up by an Italian fishing boat that put out from Viesta. A civilian in the lighthouse had seen us go down through his binoculars. We were sending out our May-Day, of course, but didn't see the Air Sea Rescue folks until we docked. The seas were running pretty high that day (it was 13 September).

'Then, on 18 November we were on one of those easy milk runs. Flak was supposed to be light and inaccurate. It was either a German airfield or a marshalling yard (I can't remember for sure) near Udine, in northern Italy. But they must have had instructors on those guns. We got zapped right at "bombs away". We bailed out in the mountains near the Yugoslavia/Italy border. Four of us walked back. We lucked into some Yugoslav partisans who told us that two of our crew were dead and four captured. We never saw them. That was our 33rd mission.

'We were MIA (missing in action), of course, and spent nearly a month hiking with relays of partisan patrols through half of Yugoslavia it seemed.

**Right, top to bottom**
**'Before and after' photos of a bomber and its crew. This Liberator did not survive a 25 July 1944 mission to Linz, in Austria, although every man in the crew walked away from the wreckage. Note how crewmen had streamed parachutes out of the waist gun hatches in an effort to slow the crippled bomber down upon landing. *"SWEE' PEA"* was B-24H 41-28732, and notes that accompanied these photographs indicate that one Ed Trenner was its pilot. The aircraft was assigned to the 764th BS/461st BG at Torretto (*Manny Weber via Robert F Dorr*)**

We made it to Zadar, on the coast, where we were picked up by the Royal Navy and taken back to Italy. I spent a couple of days in the hospital in Foggia, then went back to the 460th BG.

'Lo and behold, a couple of weeks later the CQ (charge of quarters) woke me up for a mission. I was sharing a tufta-block hut "on campus" with some groundcrew personnel who had adopted me, since I was the only "non-com" (non-commissioned officer) left over from my crew and had no tent any more. So I was back on flying status, as was my pilot and co-pilot. Near the end of November we flew one mission where we had to make an emergency landing at a South African Air Force B-26 Marauder base near Pescara, Italy.'

Mund wonders if any other B-24 crew members 'went through three aeroplanes, two bailouts under unfriendly conditions, lost most of his crew, went MIA for over three weeks behind the lines, and was still sent out to fly again'. His experience may have been unique.

During November, Fifteenth Air Force bombers were in the air on 23 days, mostly carrying out CBO missions deep into Germany. The Luftwaffe now posed less a threat, and in December, when 'heavies' were in the air for 21 days, there was a noticeable decline in fighter opposition.

The record keepers determined that during November and December, Fifteenth Air Force bombers put 36 per cent of their bombs within 1000 ft of their target, while those in the Eighth Air Force scored similarly with only 25 per cent. Today, it is difficult to understand where these numbers came from, for a post-war Allied survey revealed that bombing was typically nowhere near as accurate.

18
"Sweet Pea"

# 1945

At the start of the 1945 there may have been some who still doubted the outcome of the war, but their numbers were few. There were plenty of questions about the timing of the eventual Allied victory, however. Army Air Forces generals could not afford the luxury of assuming anything. They began formulating plans to modernise the Fifteenth Air Force in the event that the campaign in Europe lasted another full year. The decision had already been made to concentrate B-29 Superfortress operations in the Pacific, where the likelihood of continued fighting into the late 1940s seemed a certainty to many, so for Italy, the AAF decided on the single-tail Ford B-24N Liberator.

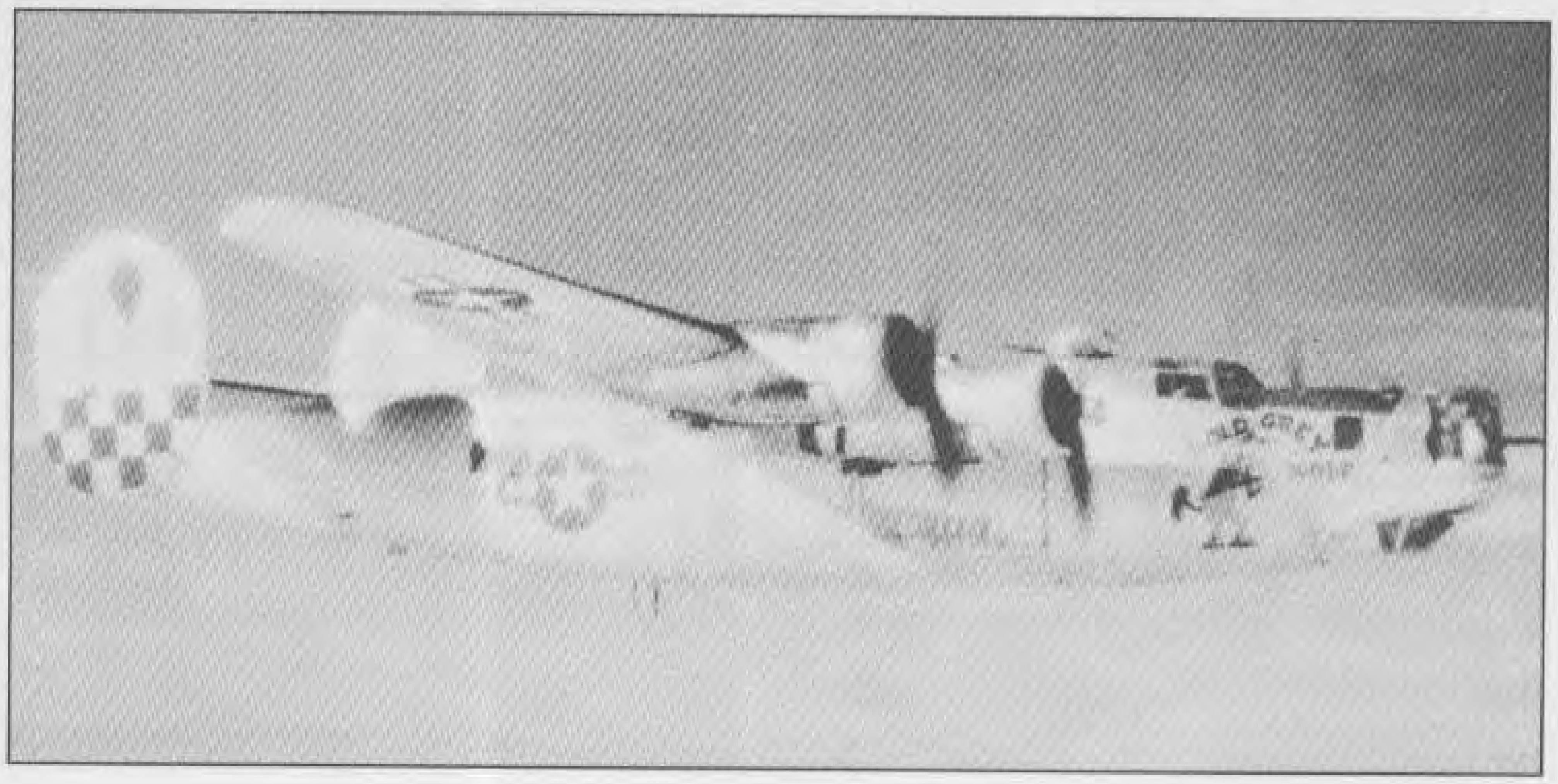
A 12 February 1945 message from AAF boss Gen Henry 'Hap' Arnold told officers in Europe that the B-24N 'will soon replace the B-24L in production, and such changes that cannot be readily incorporated in the B-24L will probably be incorporated into the B-24N aircraft'. On 17 February, Gen Carl 'Tooey' Spaatz, responsible for both the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces, requested that a B-24N be moved to the combat theatre as soon as possible to enable planners to resolve combat configuration issues.

Plans to introduce the single-tail Liberator have received little attention in the lore of this great bomber. Two years earlier, Ford had modified a B-24D to incorporate a single vertical tail and 1350-hp R-1830-75 engines under the designation XB-24K. Later, and using different design materials, Ford converted a B-24J (44-48753) into a single-tail XB-24N, similar in appearance to the XB-24K prototype, but with a ball turret in the nose and a modified tail turret. The interior of the N-model bomber was vastly improved over other Liberators, and held forth the prospect that beleaguered crews might, finally, be as comfortable as their brothers in Flying Fortresses. Amid high hopes, Ford manufactured seven YB-24N single-tailed variants (44-52053 to -52059), and orders were placed for 5168 production B-24Ns.

It was all for nothing. So far as can be determined, no single-tailed Liberator ever reached Italy. Arnold and Spaatz, as it turned out, were thinking farther ahead than they needed to. In fact, the all 5168 production B-24Ns were cancelled. Fifteenth Air Force crews flew twin-tailed bombers to the finish.

## FEBRUARY 1945

1945 got off to a slow beginning because of the always abysmal weather. However, in February Fifteenth Air Force bombers succeeded in getting into the air on 21 days, and went one better in March. Targets included oil refineries and

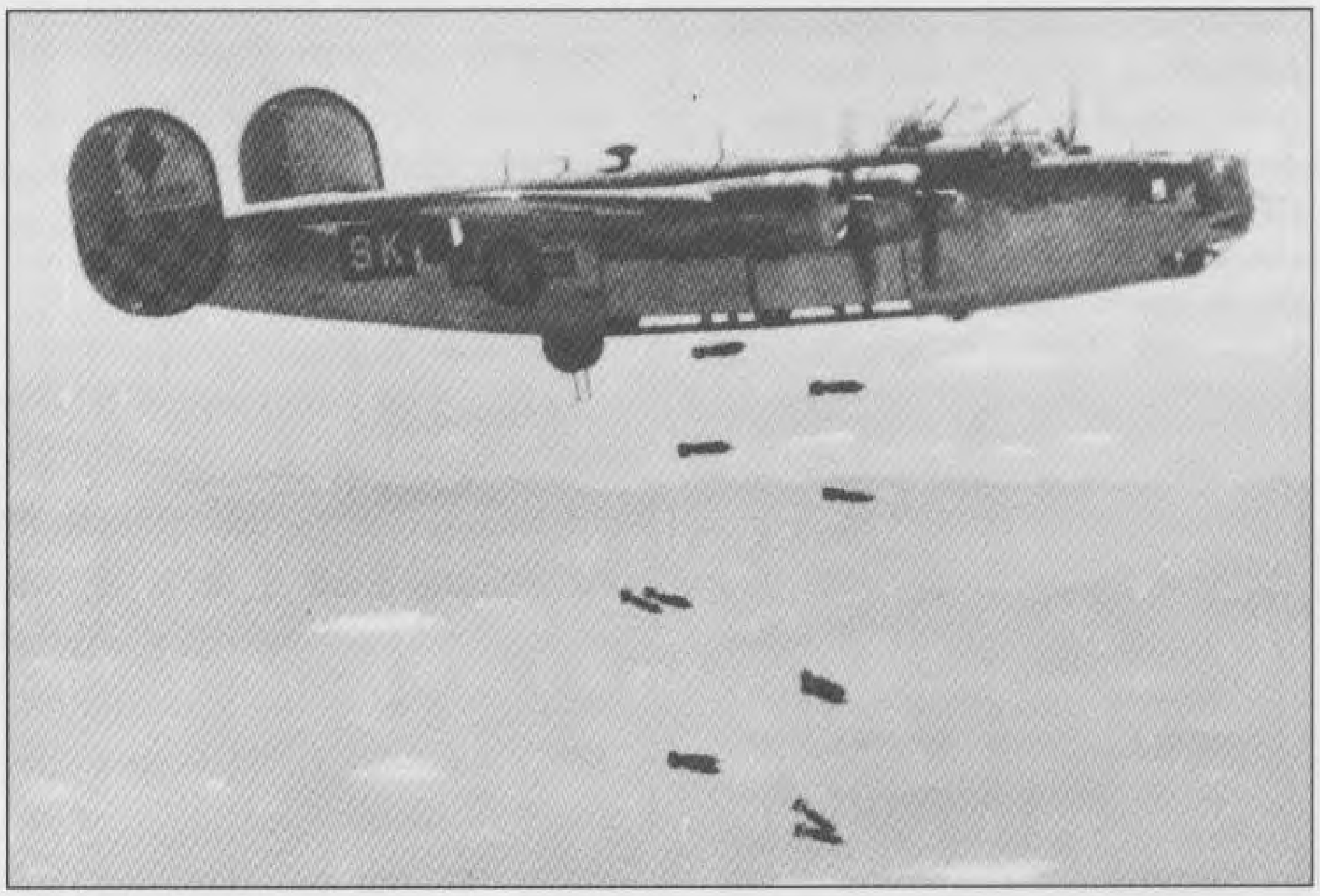


**Ford B-24J-15-FO 42-51934 *The OLD GREY WOLF* was the appellation given to this Liberator. It was named in honour of the group commander of the 459th BG, Henry K Mooney, who at age 32 was considered quite elderly! The aircraft was assigned to the group's 756th BS (*459th BG Association*)**

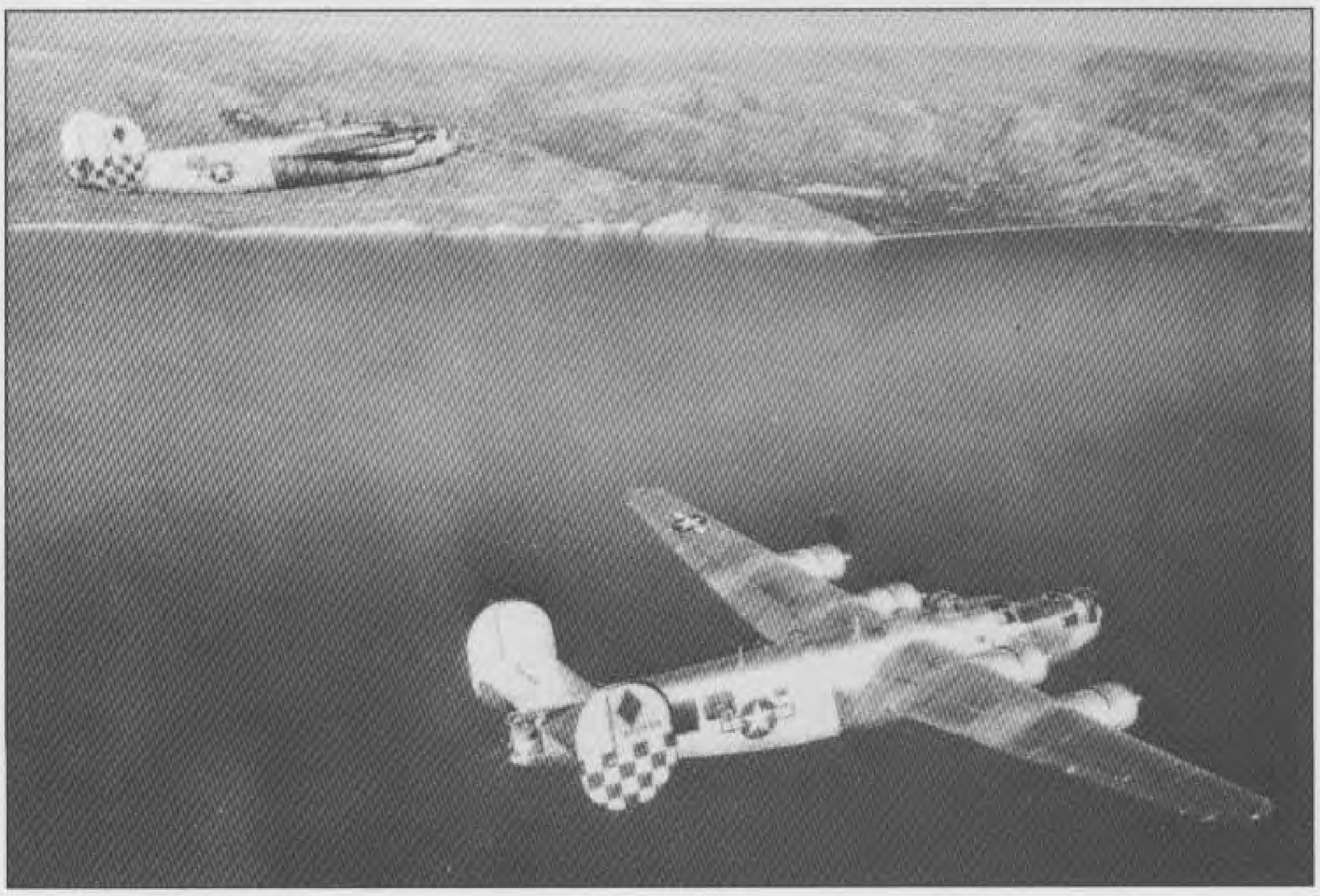
'Waltzing' along the Danube, B-24s from the Giulia-based 459th BG wade through heavy flak over Vienna (*459th BG Association*)

marshalling yards. On 16 February, 263 B-24s attacked the factory at Regensburg where Me 262 jet fighters were being manufactured. Liberators also struck Neuberg, west of Regensburg, where factory-fresh Me 262s were lined up on the ramp. The two raids destroyed numerous buildings and 20 to 30 aircraft.

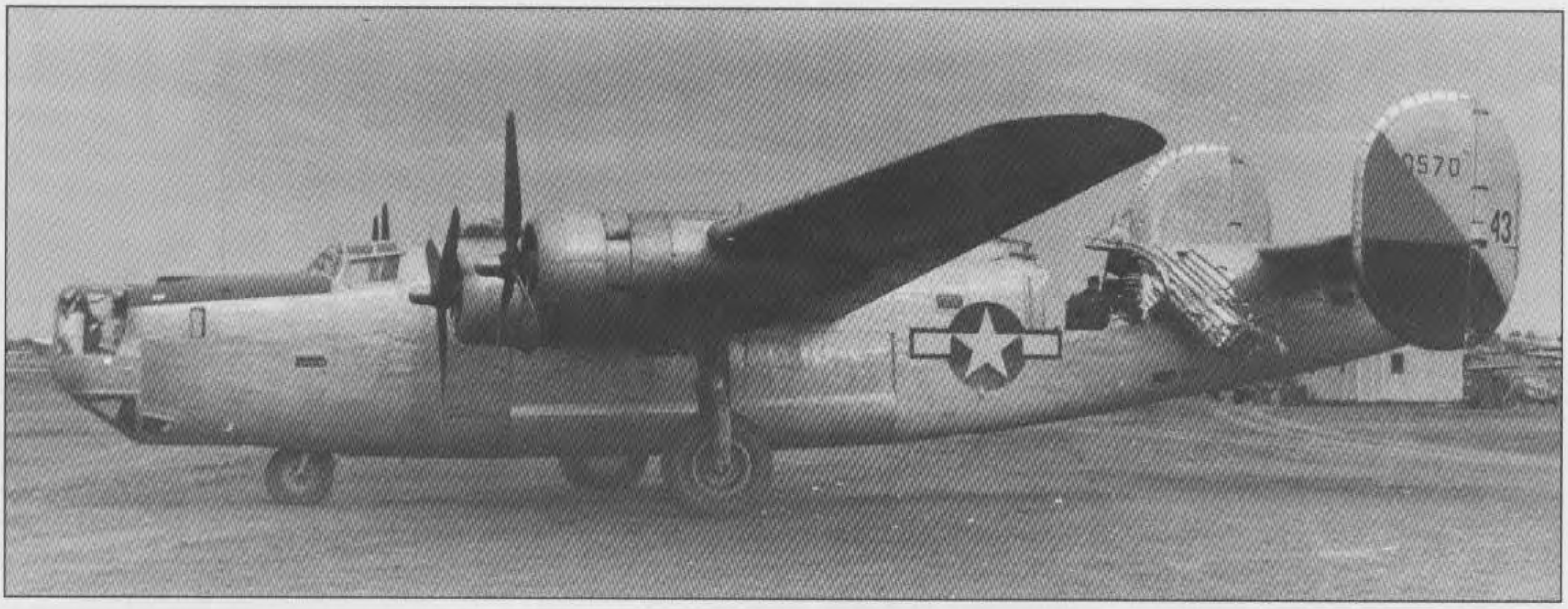
Three days later a Liberator from the 343rd BS/98th BG made an emergency landing on a fighter base in northern Italy. Pilot 1Lt Floyd H Lawson remembers that, 'The landing was "dead stick" from over 5000 ft, with only the number three engine windmilling. There was plenty of gas in the wing-tip tanks but the fuel transfer pumps wouldn't function.' The problem was one that arose on B-24s from time to time, and Lawson always wondered why it had not been repaired by this late stage in the war.



B-24M-5-FO Liberator 44-50559 of the 459th BG releases its bombs over the target in early 1945. Note how the three powered turrets visible in this photo are all pointing in different directions, the gunners scanning the sky for enemy fighters (*459th BG Association*)



B-24M-5-FO Liberator 44-50559 (in the foreground) and an unidentified squadronmate were photographed flying around what crews called the 'spur' of Italy (*459th BG Association*)



In early 1945 1Lt Bernard Ball of the 449th BG was flying this B-24J-CF on a mission against a bridge in Yugoslavia when the Liberator received a direct flak burst in the waist section forward. The shell did not explode until it hit the roof inside the bomber, and upon detonation, it ripped open the waist, wiped out both waist guns, severed the rudder cables, and killed one crew member. Ball flew home using the throttle only, since the remaining flying controls were inoperable (*AAF via William N Hess*)

On 19 March the Fifteenth Air Force's four-engined bombers hit transportation targets in and around Vienna, whilst no fewer than three bomb wings went back to Neuberg to pulverise the airfield. On 24 March 271 Liberators administered the *coup de grace* on this site, levelling the place, and destroying 20 Me 262s on the ground.

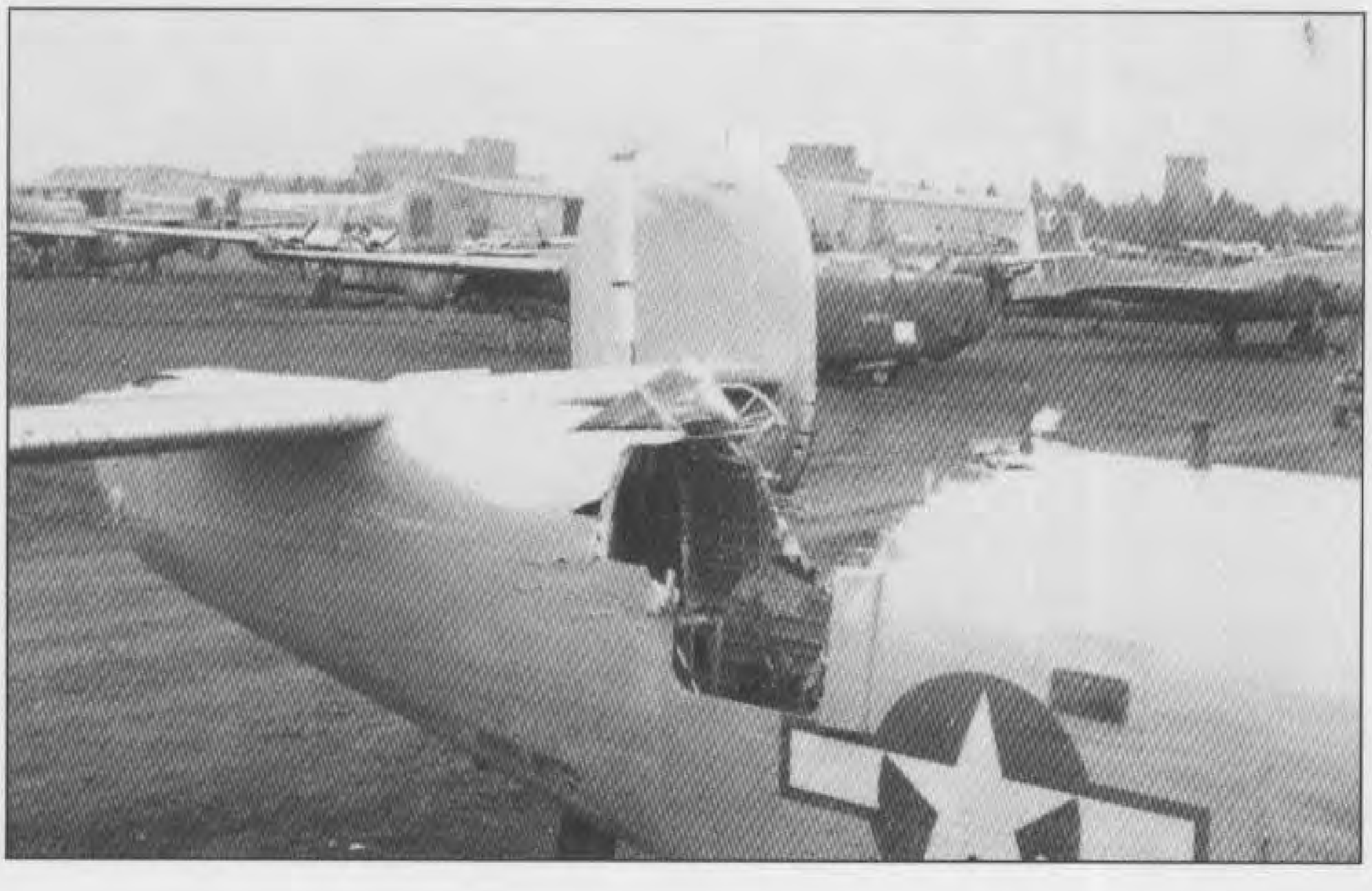
Fifteenth Air Force fliers knew that they were gaining new strength every day, and the Luftwaffe was being whittled away relentlessly. They did not, for the most part, realise that the war was nearly over. On 25 March, when Liberators bombed Prague, flak was frightening, but the Luftwaffe was nowhere to be seen.

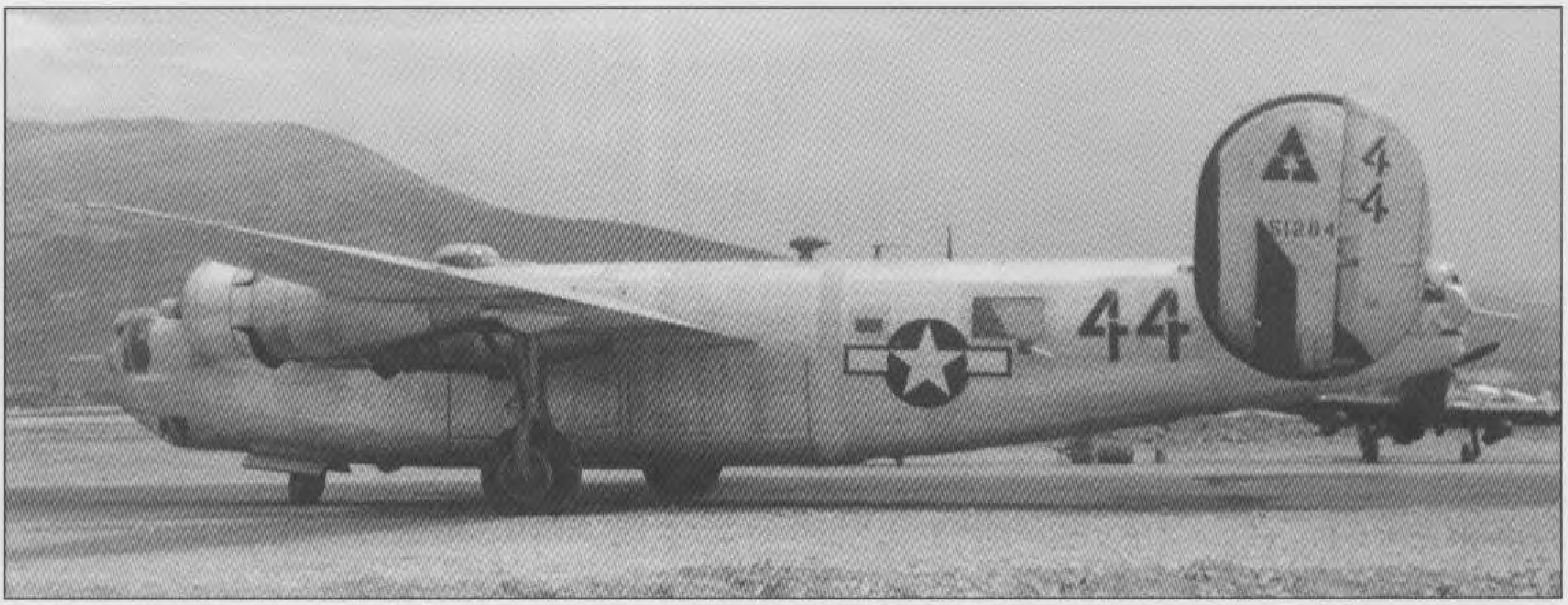
The Fifteenth Air Force was at peak strength now, and could launch more than one mission per day. Continuing arrivals of trained combat crews and replacement aircraft from the states, and much lower loss rates, had resulted in a far more powerful Army Air Forces presence in Italy. These reinforcements meant that more attention than ever could be paid to the final effort against German supplies and transport. An enormous amount of punishment was being meted out to the Third Reich, with much of it aimed at Germany itself. Pilot 1Lt Ted Ringwald of the 757th BS/459th BG provided the following description of one of these late-in-the-war missions;

'It was early and still very dark on that spring morning of 25 March 1945 at Giulia Field, Italy, when my crew and I entered the 757th BS tufta block mess hall for breakfast. Our meal consisted of canned orange juice, dehydrated, scrambled eggs, fried spam, "SOS" ("shit on a shingle", the term for chipped beef on toast) and coffee. No matter how hard the mess sergeant and cooks worked, or what they cooked, breakfast before a combat mission was not an enjoyable meal.

'After breakfast 1Lt Jack Rombach, my navigator, and I caught a 6x6 truck up to the 459th BG briefing room for the mission briefing, while the rest of the crew went to the

A close-up from the other side of 1Lt Bernard Ball's B-24J after sustaining its remarkable damage (*AAF via William N Hess*)





This Ford-built B-24M-25-FO Liberator (44-51284) of the 450th BG was photographed taxying out at Manduria in April 1945. Note the war-weary Hurricane II parked behind the bomber, and the natural-metal Mustang sat away in the distance (*Fred Bamberger*)

aircraft. The large briefing map depicted our scheduled flight route, with a wide red ribbon that seemed to run from the floor all the way to the ceiling. The target was the tank works in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Weather briefing called for good weather on the whole route. The intelligence briefer said that as the Germans retreated west, they took their 88-mm flak guns with them. So, we should expect heavy flak in the target area. This would be the deepest penetration of enemy territory that my crew and I had ever flown.

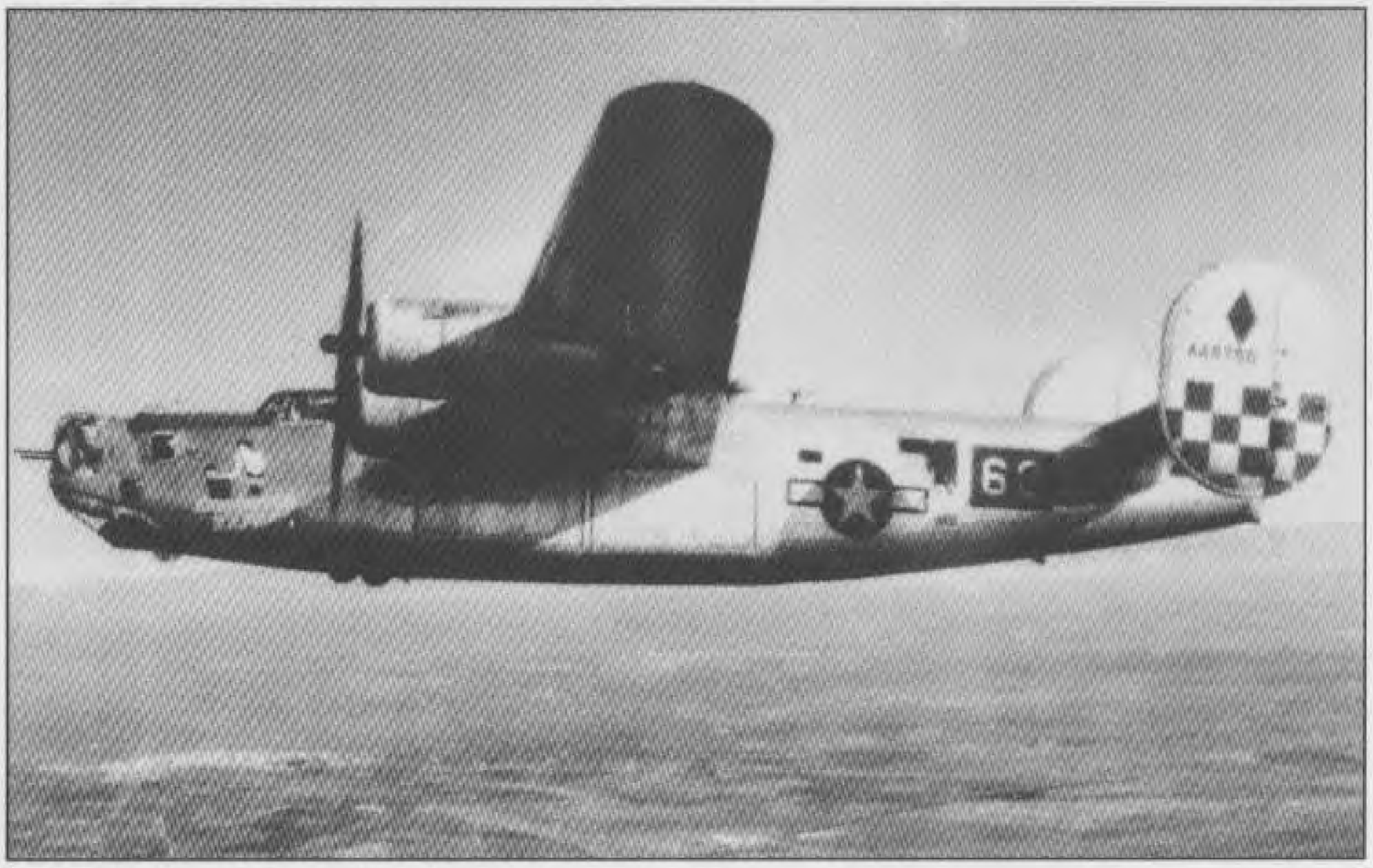
'After the briefing, Jack and I were dropped off at the hardstand where our crew and our war-laden B-24L awaited us. Our crew had finished loading the escape kits and personal equipment aboard, and had also gone through the pre-flight inspection. On this mission we carried six 1000-lb (554-kg) bombs that seemed to fill the whole bomb-bay.

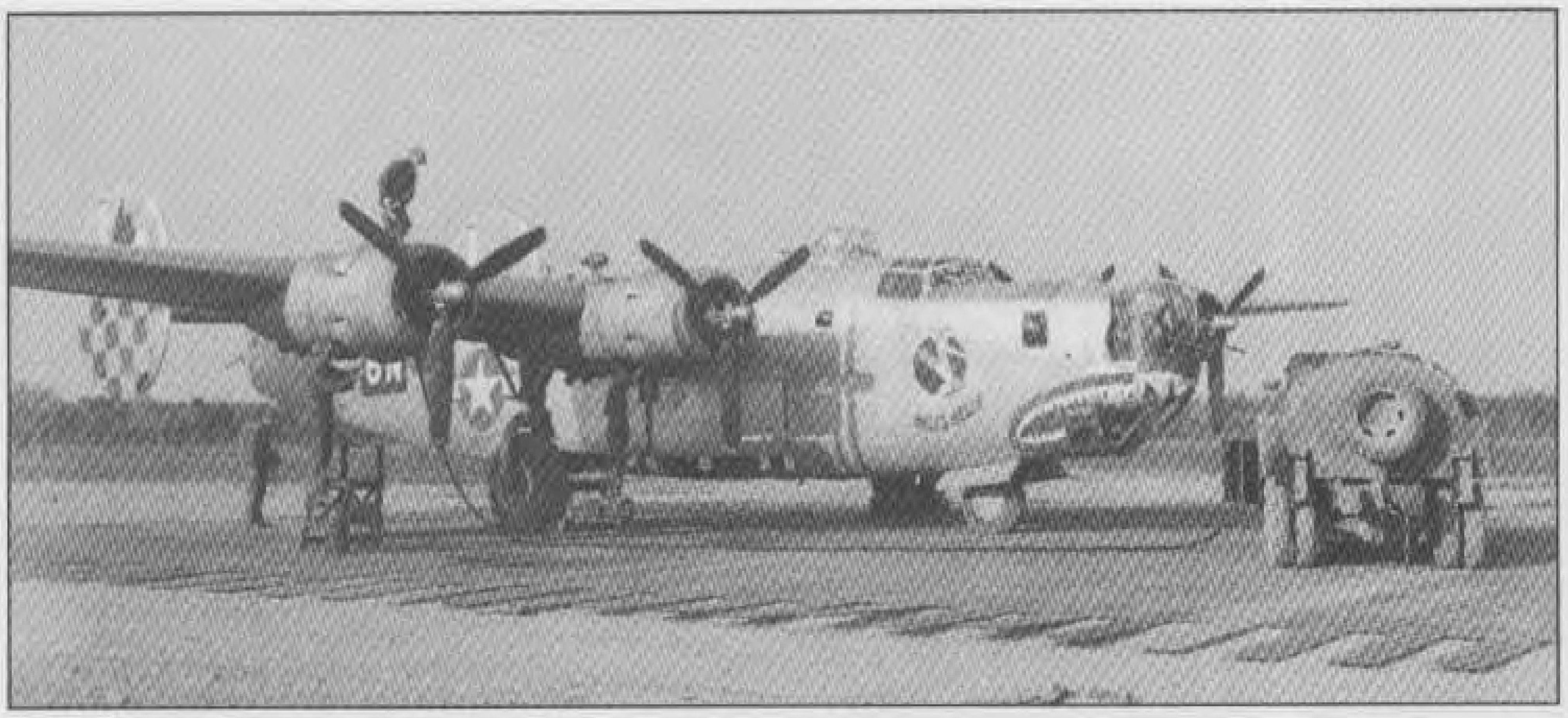
'Upon getting into my seat, one of the first things I did was to plug into the electrical system to check out my heated suit equipment. With readings on the outside air temperature at 25,000 ft (7620 m) over Germany that were off the scale at -60 degrees centigrade, a heated suit, heated gloves, heated shoe inserts and a heated oxygen mask were all imperative. Engine start and taxy was by time and flares from the tower while we maintained radio silence.

'We taxied out in our position of take-off order and waited for the aeroplane in front of us to line up on the runway for take-off. Take-off separation was 30 seconds. You always hoped for a crosswind to clear the propwash and the dust from the dirt runway. In the past few days they had sprayed the dirt and gravel runway with oil. This was good because it held the dirt down, but it was bad because the oil and dirt caked on the underside of the Liberators.

'Off we went, engines roaring, then climbing, always climbing, to reach bombing altitude. Over the Adriatic, the gunners tested their guns and operated their turrets. My

Also illustrated in the previous chapter, 756th BS/459th BG Ford B-24L-10-FO Liberator 44-49750 *DOGPATCH EXPRESS* is seen on a late-war mission in early 1945 (*459th BG Association*)





**B-24J-185-CO Liberator 44-40926 *HELL'S BELLE* was one of at least a dozen bombers to bear the name in World War 2. This example served with the 459th BG, and was photographed being refuelled at Giulia in 1945 (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

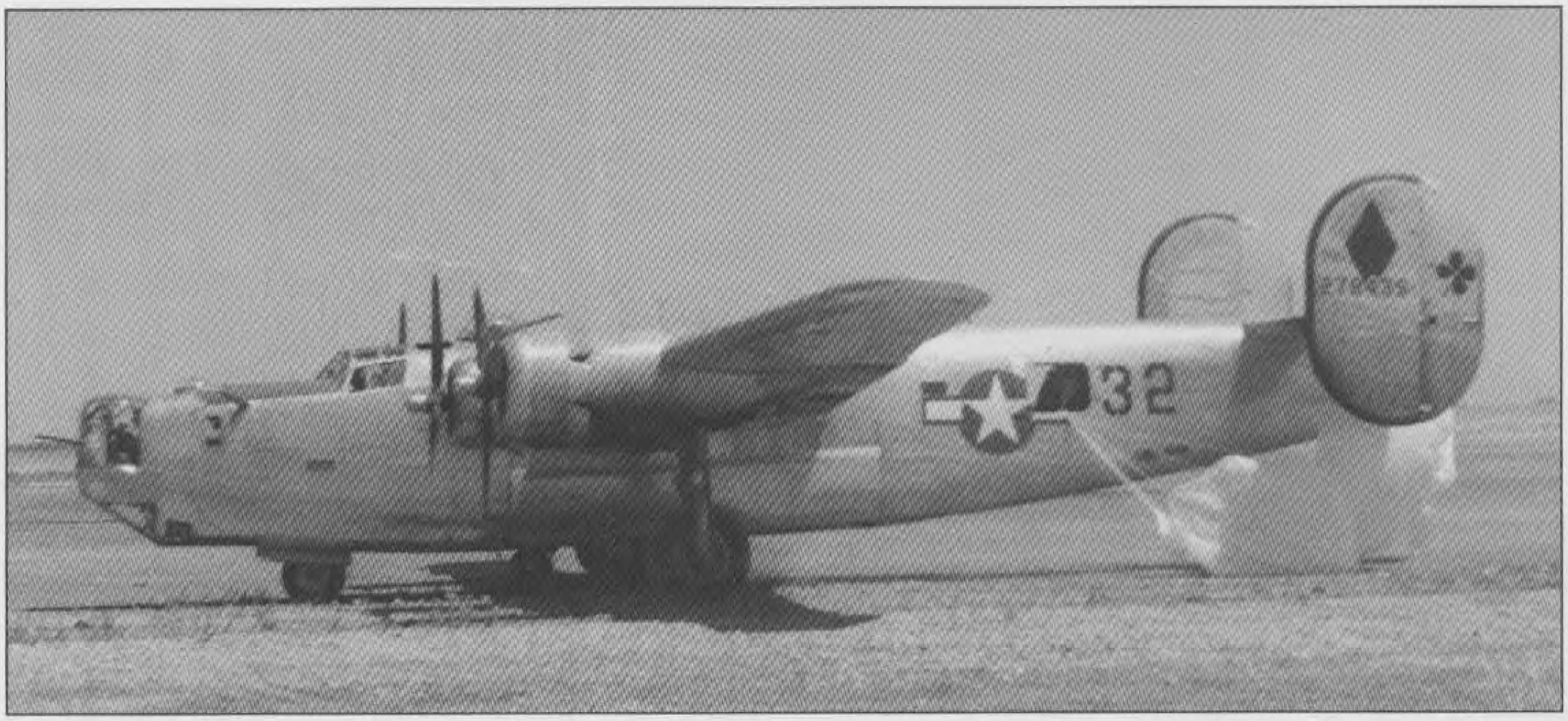
**Co-pilot and the two waist gunners smiling at the camera, this 460th BG B-24J Liberator climbs out on a mission in the early spring of 1945 (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

co-pilot, 1Lt Si Sciutto, and I took 15-minute turns at flying formation. As we flew north up over the northern coast of Italy we could see the bomber stream in front of us, and off to the right a steady bomber stream of B-24s and B-17s returning from the bombing mission. As we flew deeper into enemy territory, every town of any size appeared to be burning.

'As we approached the initial point to turn onto the target, it was easy to locate Prague. There was a huge black cloud of flak directly over the city and at our altitude. We didn't need any encouragement to put on our flak jackets and helmets. On the ground you could see the smoke from the bombs dropped on the target by the bomb groups in front of us. The group leader moved the group formation up closer to the group in front of us to split the flak. The flak was heavy, and it sounded like a group of people standing outside the aeroplane hitting it as hard as they could with baseball bats. The toggler's "Bombs away!" was like music to our ears. We rallied to the right, losing altitude and decreasing engine power and rpm (revolutions per minute) for the first time since take-off. What a relief! It was hard to believe that the engines could take that kind of pounding.

'The flak had damaged the top turret and knocked out our hydraulic system. As we started our long and gentle descent back to Giulia Field, we could look out on the

**The weather, always it was the weather. Six decades after the first flight of a B-24 Liberator, at a gathering of B-24 veterans in San Diego in November 1999, a poll was taken as to what worried men the most. High on the list were flak and fighters, but the hostile weather of the European land mass topped them all. In this study of the 449th BG's dispersal at Grottaglie, the problem was not so much the snow, although there was plenty to impede taxying and pre-flight preparations. The real problem was that gloomy sky in the background, into which Liberators had to fly to assault the Third Reich (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

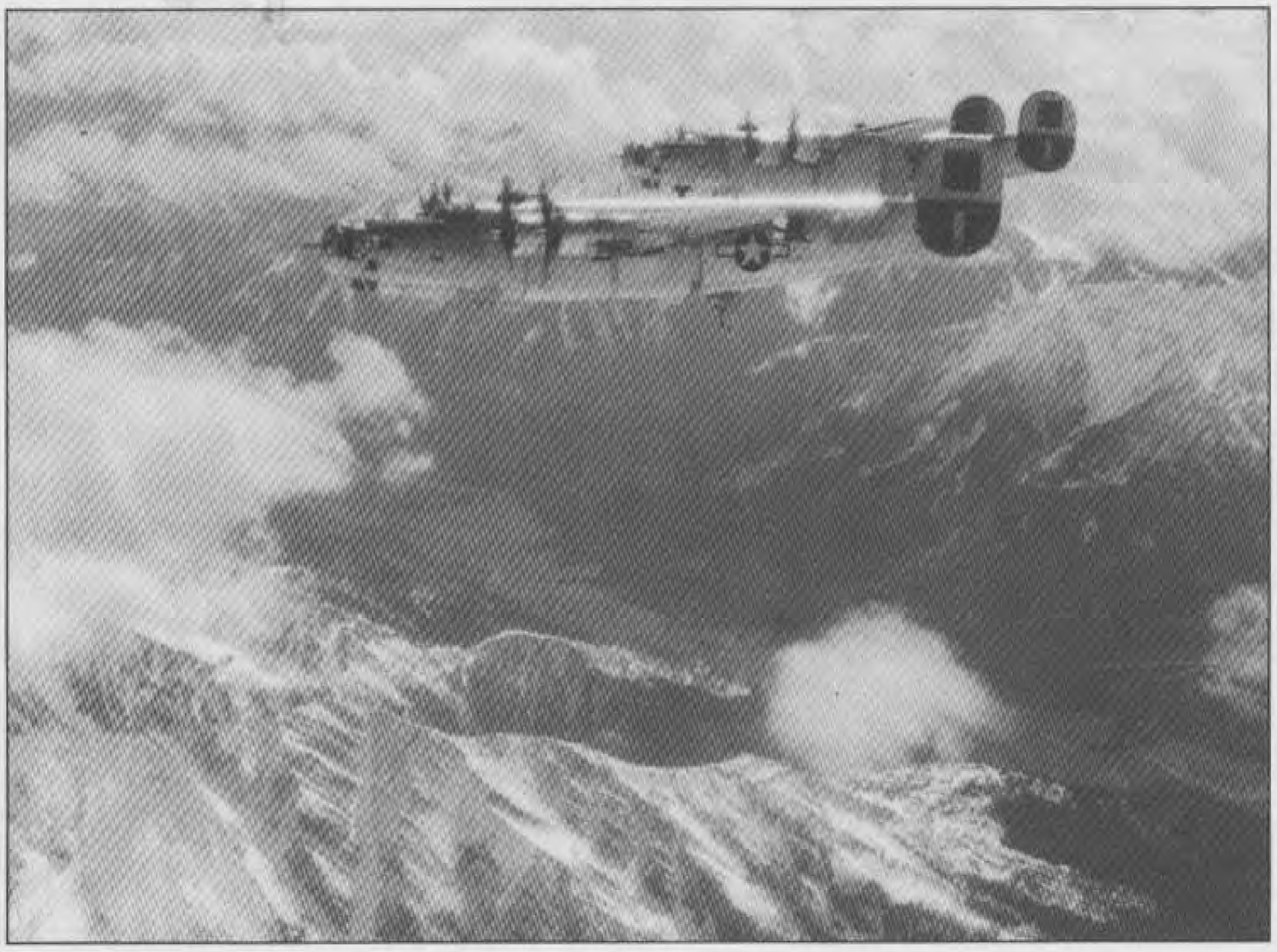


**Long before aircraft were routinely manufactured with braking parachutes, Liberator crews occasionally used personal parachutes to help slow down a landing roll in an emergency. This North American B-24G-16-NT (42-78435) of the 456th BG, piloted by Capt Bill R Adams, had its hydraulics shot out on a mission to the Manfried-Weiss motor works in Budapest, and the crew struggled mightily to bring the bomber safely to a stop back at their Stornara base (*AAF via Allan G Blue*)**

right side of the Liberator and see the bomber stream heading north for their targets. The radio operator, Sgt Earl Porter, tuned in Foggia Armed Forces Radio, and we listened to the song *Flying Home* while our engineer, Sgt Jerry Tavolott, tried unsuccessfully to repair the hydraulic system.

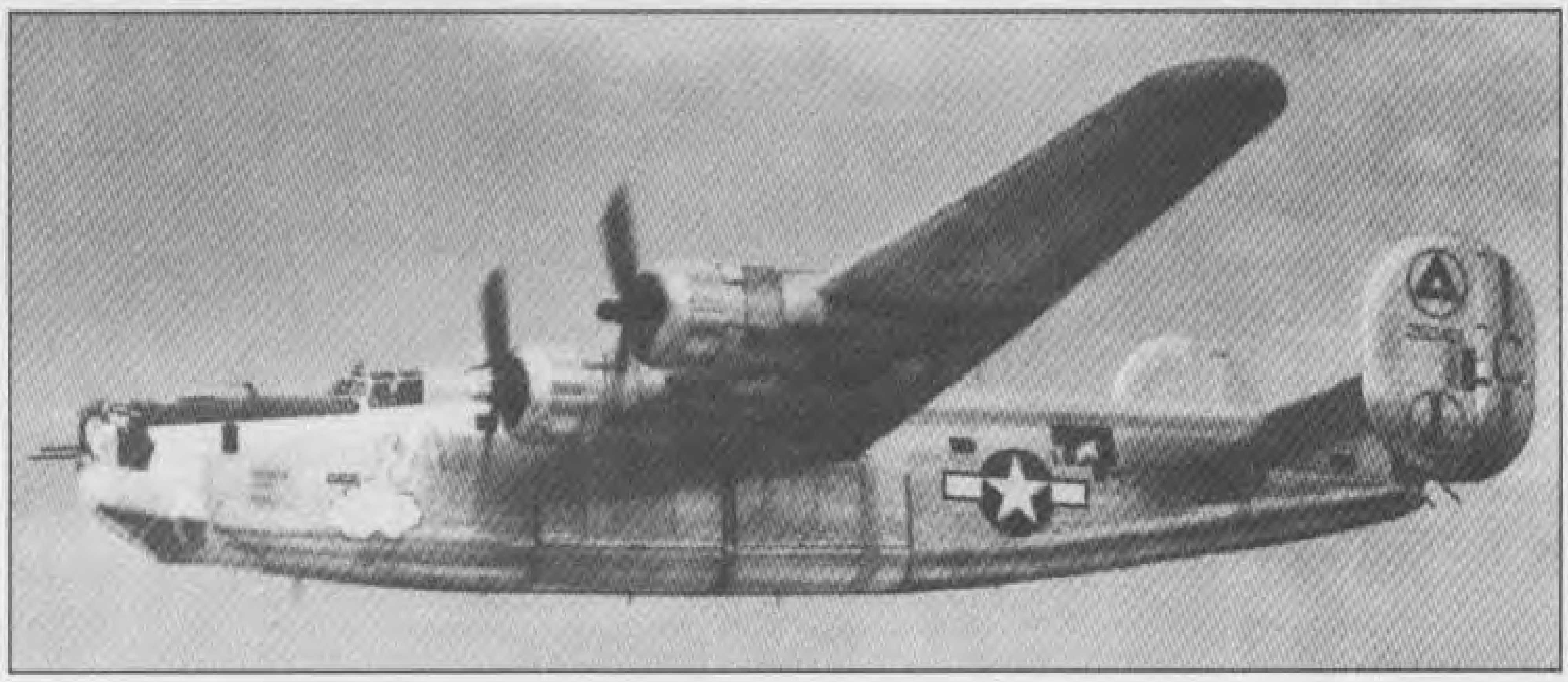
'On returning to Giulia Field, we were the last to land. We cranked down the landing gear, pushed out the nose wheel, and dumped down all the flaps we could get. The waist gunners, Sgts Ed Raether and Art Fiveash, secured their parachutes to the gun posts at the waist windows, and after touchdown they popped the 'chutes out the waist windows. We cut the engines and rolled slowly to the end of the runway, turning off onto the taxy strip. There was just enough reserve pressure remaining in the brake system to set the parking brakes. Altogether, it had been a long flight, with a total of eight hours and fifteen minutes of flying time. There were 39 holes in the aeroplane, and we were grateful that none of us was injured.

'The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper was published the following day with



**These B-24 Liberators of the 779th BS/464th BG were photographed crossing the Alps after taking off from Pantanella Field. The group was participating in a CBO mission at the time (*Jo Ann Breckenridge*)**

Silver Queen



**Top and above**
**Two views of *Silver Queen*, a pristine Fort Worth-built B-24H-30-CF Liberator (42-50413) flown by the crew of 1Lt John 'Jack' Stevens of the 344th BS/98th BG at Caesar Fortunato Air Base at Lecce. In the top view, pilot Stevens is kneeling, second from right. In the flight view, although it is difficult to see without holding a magnifying glass up to the original, the waist gunner is 'mooning' the aircraft from which the photo was taken!**
**(*Vince Re/Cynthia Stevens*)**

the headline, "15,000 Airplanes Attack the Axis". To make it complete, according to the newspaper story, one crew took along a kitchen sink that they dropped on Germany.'

## MAXIMUM EFFORT

The largest number of aircraft ever put aloft by the Fifteenth Air Force were in the air on 15 April 1945 when Wehrmacht troop concentrations dug in around Bologna were attacked. No fewer than 1821 sorties were mounted that day, 586 by fighters and 1235 by heavy bombers. Allied ground forces overran Bologna a few days later, but by then the Fifteenth Air Force had virtually finished the job.

In the final days of fighting in April, an odd experience happened to 1Lt Guyon Phillips, a pilot with the 461st BG. Near his base, Phillips accidentally stumbled upon a Liberator of the companion 454th BG which was standing face-down, tail high, looking as if it was trying to bore into the ground at a 90-degree angle;

'Early one morning, my co-pilot and I were in a Jeep on our way to Cerignola. As I looked up the road ahead, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was the unmistakable oval fin of a B-24 high above the dirt road. This made no sense at all. Doing a double-take, I realised it was a Liberator standing on what was left of its nose.

'At first we were afraid to approach the aeroplane in case it might explode from leaking gas (of course, the bombs weren't armed, but we didn't want to assume they weren't still dangerous). An Italian farmer had been going along the road in a small horse-drawn cart, and he was over in a ditch with the overturned cart, tending to the horse. The horse didn't seem to be injured, and apparently the farmer had had to take to the ditch as the aeroplane came roaring toward him and ground to a halt just short of the ditch.

'You could tell immediately that all the crew on the flight deck had been killed instantly. The aeroplane was one of many taking off on a mission, and although the *Stars & Stripes* account mentioned "an accidental application of brakes", none of us believed that was the cause of the bizarre mishap. From every indication, the aeroplane had an emergency of some sort just before lift-off, and the pilot showered down on the brakes. A B-24 with a full load of gas and bombs just won't get into the air without power.

'Unfortunately, the pilot was past the point of no return. After running off the steel mats at the end of the runway, the nose gear sheared off and the nose of the aeroplane ground into the soft earth beyond with such

**A mixture of olive-drab and natural-metal Liberators of the 460th BG cross the Alps en route to a target in Germany in January 1945 (*AAF via William N Hess*)**

force that it literally chewed off the front of the aeroplane, right up to the engines. How the bomber kept from toppling over on its back was a miracle, which may have saved the remainder of the crew.'

It was an awful way for the men on the front deck of the Liberator to go, especially with the air war winding down.

On 21 April, the 98th BG and 376th BG stood down. The Fifteenth Air Force's longest-serving bomb groups were slated to return to the US to transition to the B-29 Superfortress for the war against Japan.

Five days later the 459th BG assembled a formation of Liberators and flew to northern Italy. Their target was a motor transport depot in the small Italian town of Tarvisio, high in the Alps near the Austrian border. Clouds over the target prevented visual bombing, and the proximity of Allied frontline troops made aiming by radar unacceptable – all Liberators returned to Giulia Field, bringing their bombs with them. The on-again, off-again nature of this unsuccessful mission typified the 'hurry up and wait' tensions of the final days of the war that were so typical of military life, and so much a sign of how things would change when wartime became peacetime. For this particular bomb group, the interrupted mission was the 261st, and last, mission in 14 months of combat.

On 29 April 1945 the war in Italy came to an end with the surrender of German forces in-country. Fighting continued elsewhere on the continent for a week longer. On 7 May 1945, peace came to Europe at 0241 in a small red schoolhouse in Rheims, where Gen Dwight D Eisenhower, the Allied Supreme Commander, had his headquarters. After Gen Alfred Jodl, Army Chief of Staff, and the German emissary, had signed the instrument of unconditional surrender, he said, 'With this signature, the

465th BG Liberators cruise away from an unidentified target in the early spring of 1945. The B-24J closest to the camera is totally devoid of any distinguishing unit markings, although the olive-drab bomber behind it wears a full set of group colours, as well as nose-art. The smoke visible in the centre of this image may have come from 'smudge' pots used by the Germans to shroud targets
(*AAF via Allan G Blue*)

German people and armed forces are, for better or worse, delivered into the victors' hands'. Gen Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, signed for the Western Allies, and Gen Ivan Suslapatov was witness for Russia.

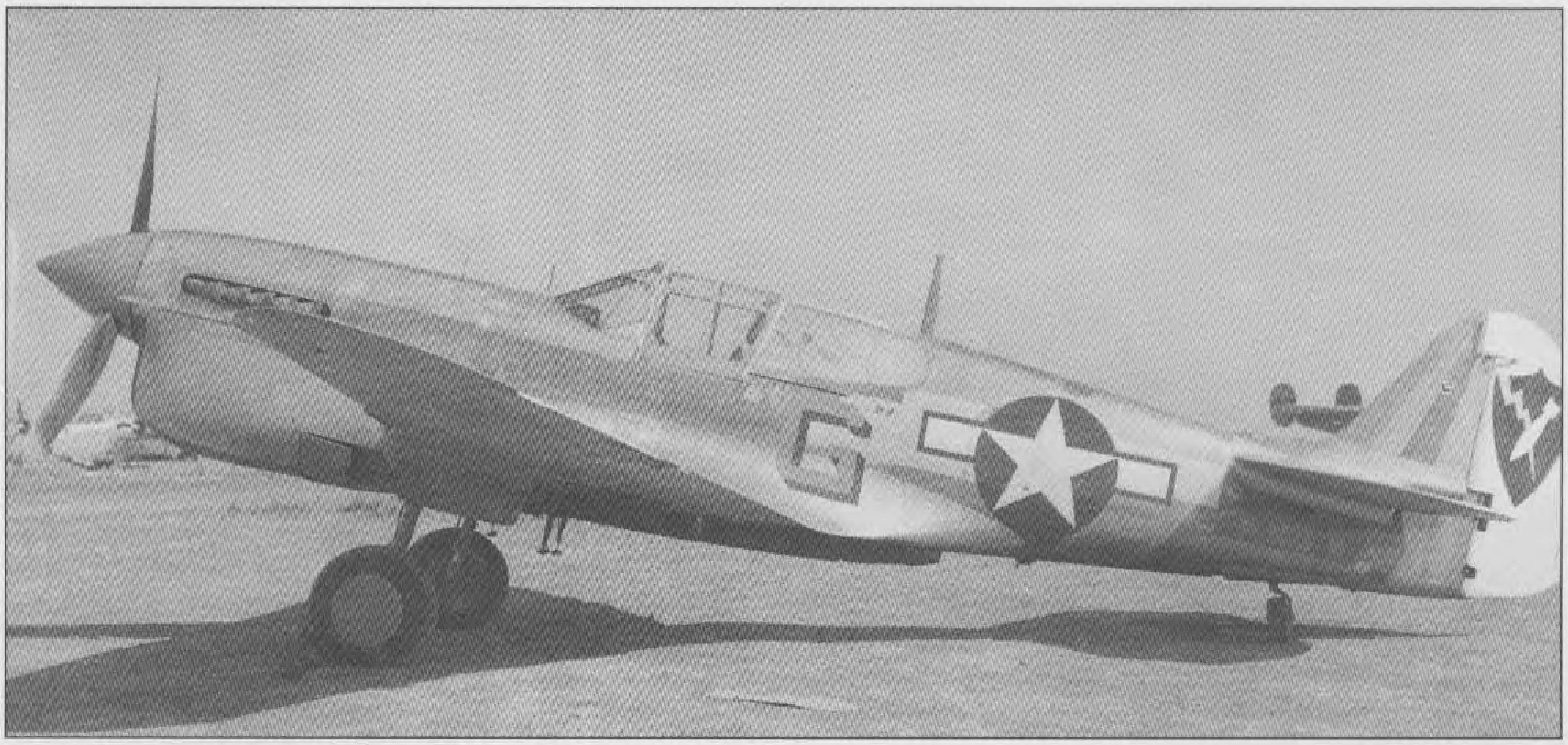
## FIFTEENTH ACHIEVEMENTS

The following summary of the Fifteenth Air Force's accomplishments was given as a handout to B-24 Liberator crews upon their return to the United States. Its purpose was to 'furnish background information for use in local newspaper articles or interviews, and a worthwhile personal history in the years to come when such facts may be extremely vital to your own interests'. The document reads;

'The 15th Air Force. In the 18 months of its existence, the 15th Air Force, operating principally from the complex of airfields in southern Italy, destroyed all gasoline production within its range in southern Europe; knocked out all the major aircraft factories in its sphere; and destroyed 6282 enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground.

LIBERRIDERS
LIBERRIDERS

Seen at Toretta some time after December 1944, these two Curtiss P-40F Warhawks belonged to the 461st BG 'Liberaiders'. Left over from Operation *Torch*, the Allied invasion of North Africa in Novembert 1942, the Warhawks were not painted in standard US Army olive-drab desert camouflage, but rather in desert sand and brown. Their serial numbers have never been learned. Prior to 'acquiring' the P-40Fs to serve as formation ships, 461st BG commander Col Frederick E Glantzberg flew P-38 Lightnings borrowed from the 325th FG
(*Jim Van Nostrand*)



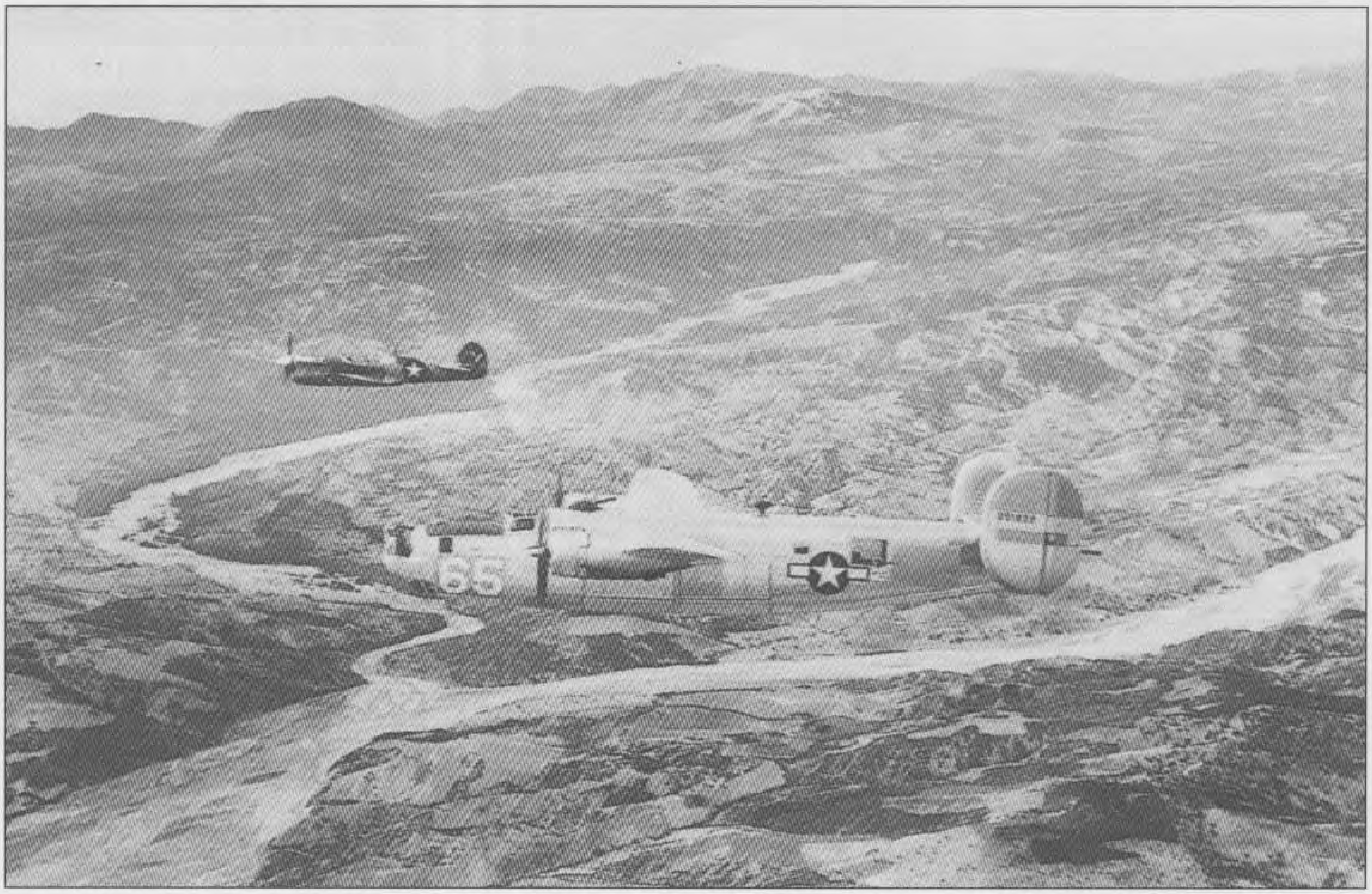
Possibly one of the P-40Fs seen on the previous page or possibly a different Warhawk entirely, this natural metal beauty wears a 'G' for the name of the 461st BG commander, Col Glantzberg. Note also the group badge painted on the aircraft's rudder (*Rob Hoskins*)

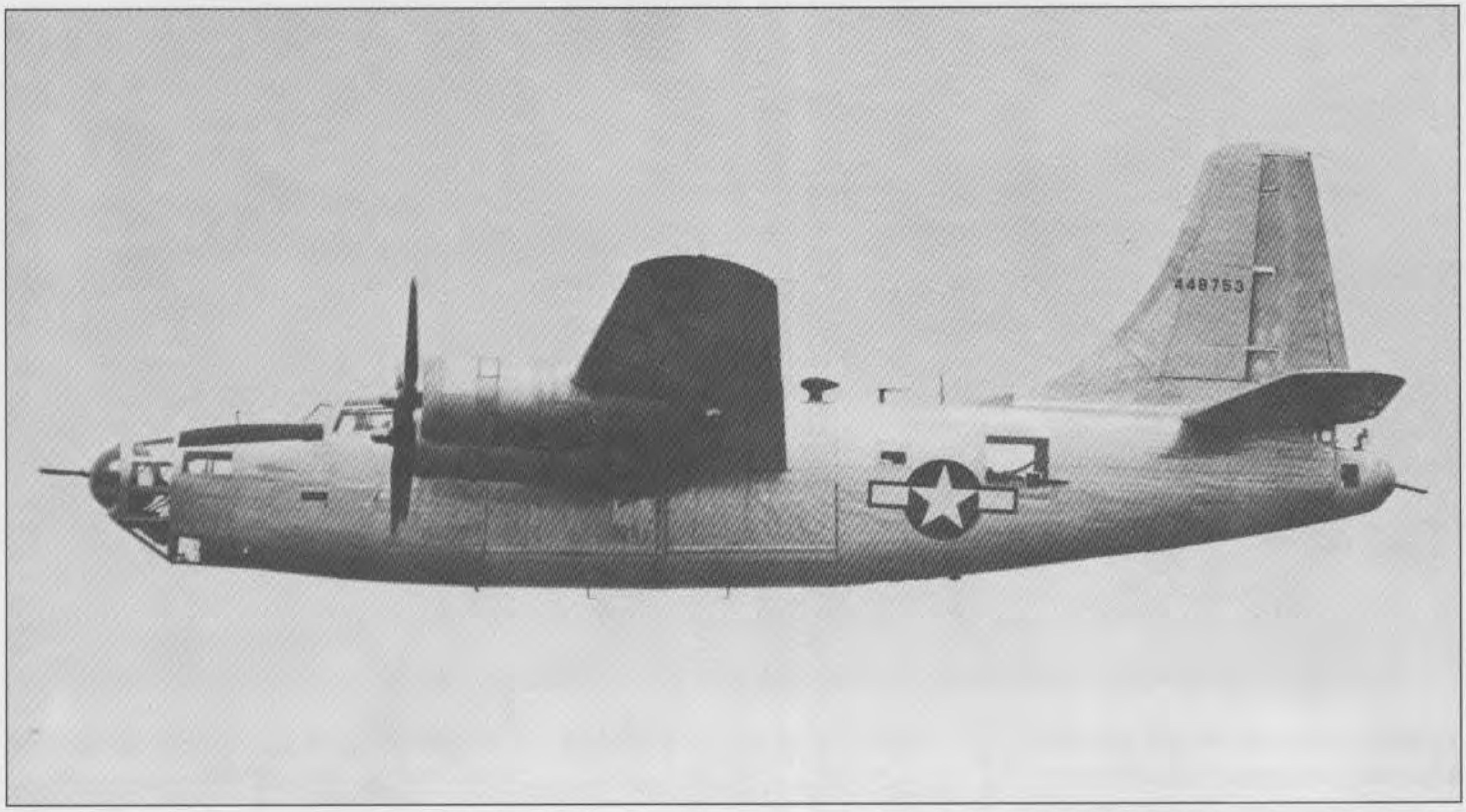
One of the P-40Fs is seen aloft, with Col Glantzberg at the controls, escorting B-24J-15-FO 42-51838 late in the war (*Rob Hoskins*)

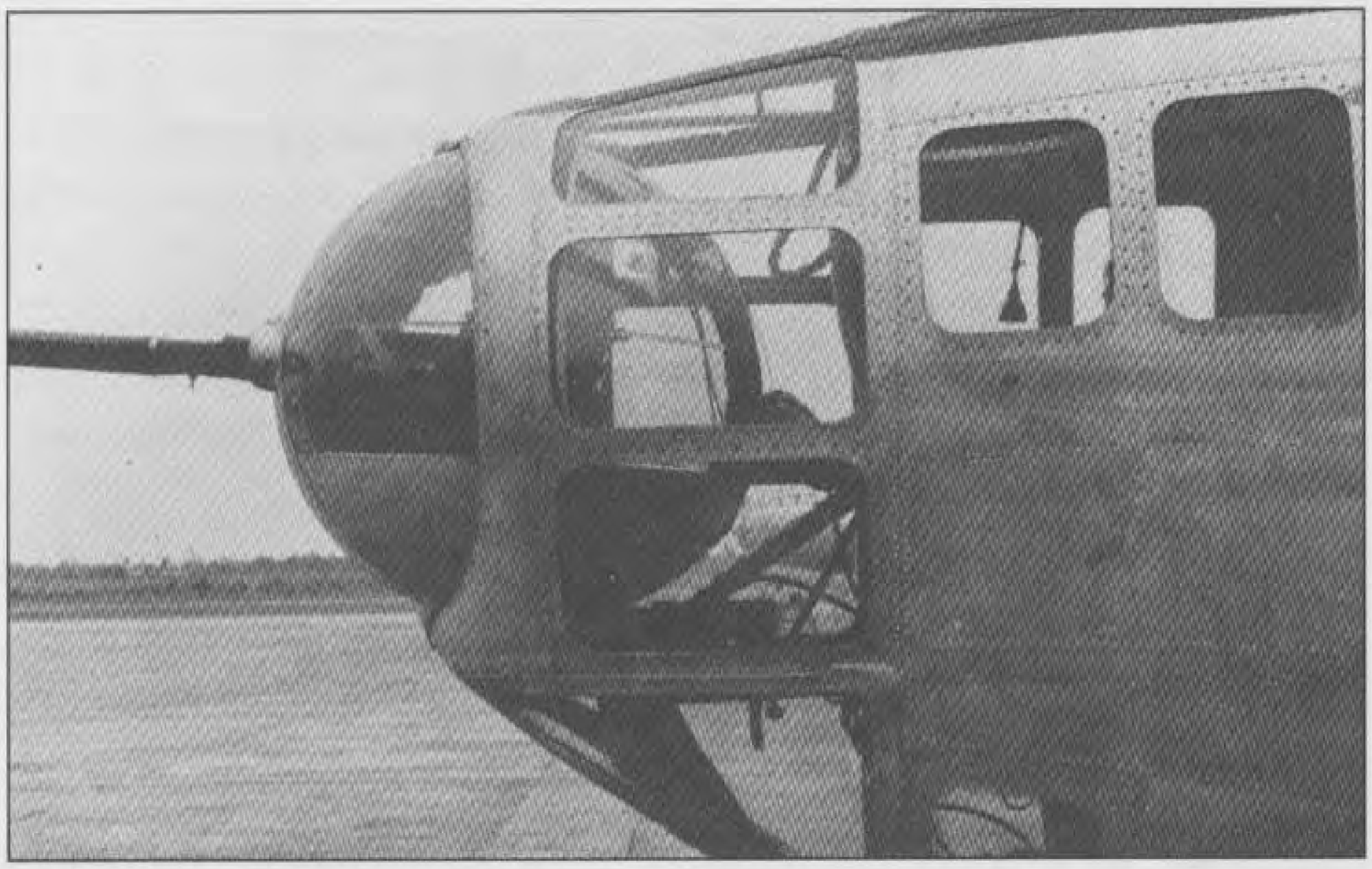
'The 15th crippled the enemy's transportation system over half of once-occupied Europe with repeated fighter and bomber attacks. On occasion it helped disperse enemy counter attacks and spearheaded the advances of our own armies.

'The 15th dropped 303,842 tons of bombs on enemy targets in 12 countries of Europe, including military installations in eight capital cities. Its combat personnel made 148,955 heavy bomber sorties and 87,732 fighter sorties against the enemy.

'(Fifteenth Air Force) It lost 3364 aircraft and 21,671 personnel killed, wounded, missing and taken prisoner – 20,430 bomber crewmen and 1187 fighter pilots.'







**Above and left**
**Had the war in the Mediterranean theatre continued just a few more months, this would have been the Liberator used in the battle zone. In 1945, AAF officers were making plans to equip squadrons in Italy with the single-fin B-24N Liberator, illustrated in these views of the first example (44-44753). In the end, it became unnecessary to proceed with this massive equipment change, and contracts for 5168 production B-24Ns were cancelled (*Consolidated via Robert F Dorr*)**

As a new century dawned, some 55 years after the Fifteenth Air Force had finished its wartime mission (but continued to survive, in name, as an Air Mobility Command outfit at Travis Air Force Base, in California), US Air Force Col John M Hudson sifted through memorabilia left behind by his late father, a bombardier in the 450th BG. Hudson recalled;

'Although he spoke very little of combat, he always extolled the virtues of the "ugly" B-24 versus the "pretty" B-17. I had the pleasure of meeting the members of his crew at a reunion, and was most impressed by the quality and strength of these men who survived the war, but couldn't beat the turning of the clock. Among the wonderful stories I heard at the reunion was a telling comment made by one, and agreed to by all. "If we knew the odds against us I'm not sure we would've had the courage to get in the aeroplane mission after mission". 'I, for one, believe that in their hearts they knew the odds and went anyway because they understood the stakes. That generation of men saved the free world.'

## B-24 UNITS OF THE FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE

**United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF)**

Bushey Park, England (from 15 February 1944) (responsible for Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces)

## FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE

Tunis HQ (1 November 1943 to war's end)

### 47th Bomb Wing

Formed at Manduria on 11 November 1943. Initial 47th BW markings consisted of a black triangle in a white disk, with a black group number in a white disk. Distinctive group markings were positioned on the outer side of rudders and the top of elevators. Later, the 47th BW used yellow and/or black designs applied diagonally to the lower-forward outer vertical tails to distinguish groups, while retaining the wing symbol, which became black on yellow.

**Groups:** 98th, 376th, 449th and 450th BGs

### 98th BG

The 98th BG (together with the 376th BG) was one of the original North Africa groups that flew the 1 August 1943 low-level Ploesti mission. It was assigned to the Ninth Air Force in November 1942, to the Twelfth Air Force in September 1943 and to the Fifteenth Air Force in November 1943. The group began its long wartime service at Navarin, Algeria, in November 1942 and moved to Oudna, Tunisia, on 4 August 1943 and to Tortorella airfield, Italy, in October 1943. It flew from Marcianise, Italy, from 11 December 1943 to the end of the war.

**Squadrons:** 343rd 'The Disney Squadron', 344th, 345th and 415th BSs

### 376th BG

The 376th BG (together with the 98th BG) was one of the original North Africa groups that flew the 1 August 1943 low-level Ploesti mission. It was assigned to the Ninth Air Force in November 1942, the Twelfth Air Force in September 1943 and to the Fifteenth Air Force in November 1943. The 376th BG operated from Abu Suier, in Egypt, and the Libyan bases at Gambut, Soluch and Benghazi, before moving to San Pancrazio, Italy, in November 1943.

**Squadrons:** 512th, 513rd, 514th and 515th BSs

### 449th BG

The 449th BG or 'Flying Horsemen' moved to Grottaglie, Italy, in December 1943, a few months after its formation in the US. Grottaglie is located just inside the 'heel' of Italy's 'boot.' The group flew its B-24 Liberators from there until the conclusion of the conflict in Europe.

**Squadrons:** 716th, 717th, 718th and 719th BSs. The 716th and 719th squadrons had no emblem at all, the 717th had an elephant throwing a bomb with his trunk and the 718th had an eagle dropping two bombs

### 450th BG

The 450th BG began operations with the Fifteenth Air Force in December 1943. The group operated from Manduria, Italy, throughout the war.

**Squadrons:** 720th, 721st, 722nd and 723rd BSs

### 49th Bomb Wing

49th BW markings consisted of a white ball in a white circle and a white group number, although this was applied inconsistently.

**Groups:** 451st, 461st and 484th BGs

### 451st BG

The 451st BG flew its B-24 Liberators from a succession of Italian airfields: Gioia del Colle from December 1943, San Pancrazio from March 1944, and Castelluccio from 6 April 1944 until fighting ended in Europe.

**Squadrons:** 724th, 725th, 726th and 727th BSs

### 461st BG

The 461st BG began combat operations with the Fifteenth Air Force in April 1944. The group spent its entire war (along with the 484th BG) flying from Torretto Field in Italy.

**Squadrons:** 764th, 765th, 766th and 767th BSs

### 484th BG

The 484th BG moved to the MTO in March and April 1944 and operated throughout the war (right alongside the 461st BG) from Torretto Field in Italy.

**Squadrons:** 824th, 825th, 826th and 827th BSs

### 55th Bomb Wing

The 55th BW adorned its Liberators with a black square atop the outer vertical tails on a yellow background as a wing symbol. On many aircraft, lower outer vertical tails were painted black with a group symbol overpainted in yellow. Both symbols also appeared elsewhere on most of the group's aircraft.

**Groups:** 460th, 464th, 465th and 485th BGs

### 460th BG

The 460th BG entered combat in March 1944 and spent the remainder of the war flying from Spinazzola, Italy.

**Squadrons:** 760th, 761st, 762nd and 763rd BSs

### 464th BG

The air echelon of the 464th BG spent a few weeks in Tunisia before the group went into combat in April 1944. Except for a brief period at Gioia in mid-1944, the group spent its entire war flying from Pantanella, Italy.

**Squadrons:** 776th, 777th, 778th and 779th BSs

### 465th BG

Also with an air echelon based briefly in Tunisia, the 465th BG moved in April 1944 to Pantanella airfield, Italy, and spent the remainder of the war there.

**Squadrons:** 780th, 781st, 782nd and 783rd BSs

### 485th BG

The 485th BG reached the Mediterranean theatre in March 1944, with the air echelon receiving training in Tunisia before the group set up shop at Venosa, Italy, where it flew B-24s from April 1944 until the end of the conflict.

**Squadrons:** 828th, 829th, 830th and 831st BSs

### 304th Bomb Wing

The 304th BW marked its Liberators with a black squared diamond in a white disk and a black group number (1 through 4) in a white disk. Later, the 304th placed an elongated diamond atop the outer fins (white on olive-drab aircraft, black on natural-metal bombers) as a wing symbol, and painted the lower surfaces a group colour or design, repeating both markings on the aircraft's upper horizontal tail surfaces.

**Groups:** 454th, 455th, 456th and 459th BGs

### 454th BG

The 454th BG moved to Italy in December 1943 and January 1944. The group's only wartime operating base was San Giovanni, Italy.

**Squadrons:** 736th, 737th, 738th and 739th BSs

### 455th BG

The 455th BG flew exclusively from San Giovanni, Italy, from about February 1944 right through to VE-Day.

**Squadrons:** 740th, 741st, 742nd and 743rd BSs

### 456th BG

Nicknamed 'Colonel Steed's Flying Colts', the 456th BG entered combat in February 1944 under Col Thomas W Steed. After a brief preparatory period at Cerignola, Italy, the 'Colts' spent their war operating from Stornara.

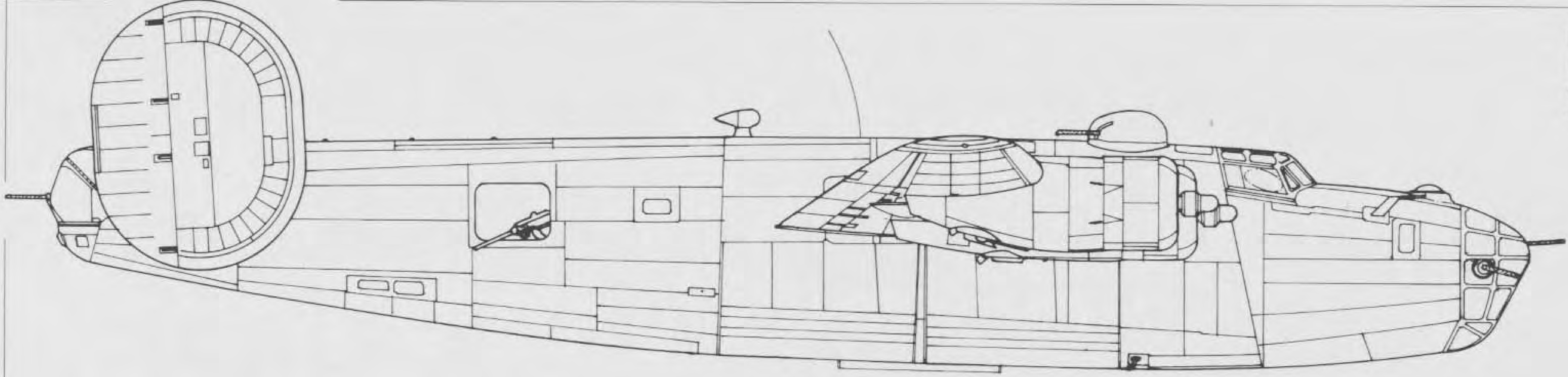
**Squadrons:** 744th 'Deliverators', 745th 'Lardasserous Rex', 747th and 756th BSs

### 459th BG

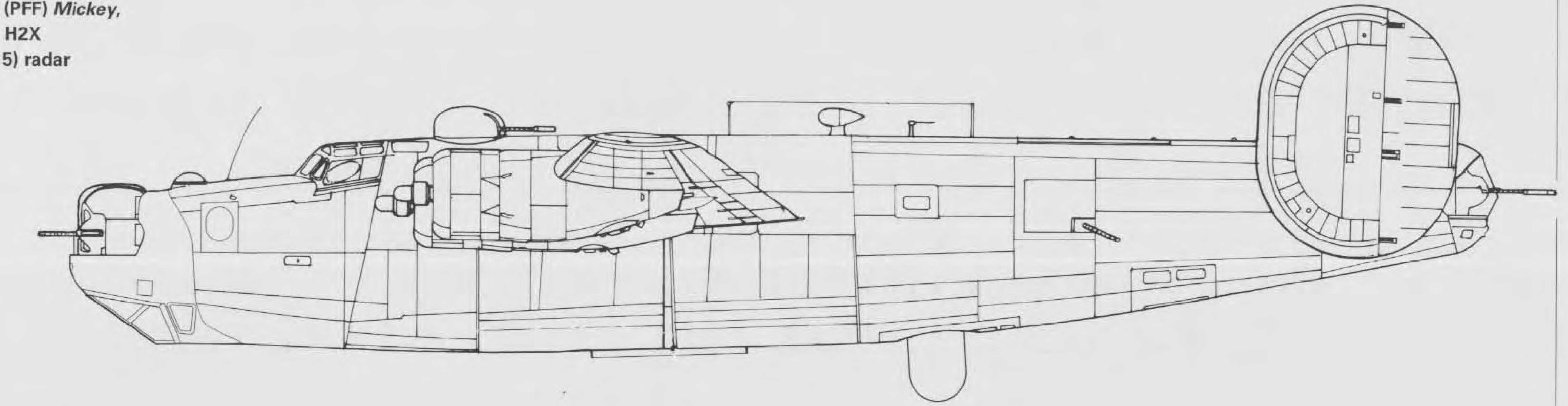
The 459th BG spent 17 months at Giulia Field, near Cerignola in Italy, until April 1945, when 'there were no targets left to bomb', as one member puts it. The original intent was to name the squadrons after the four suits in a deck of cards, but the practice was almost completely ignored.

**Squadrons:** 756th ('spades' – sharksmouth and yellow engine cowlings), 757th ('hearts' – used red hearts on nose and rudder, red engine cowlings), 758th ('diamonds' – never used distinctive markings) and 759th ('clubs' – used club markings sparingly) BSs

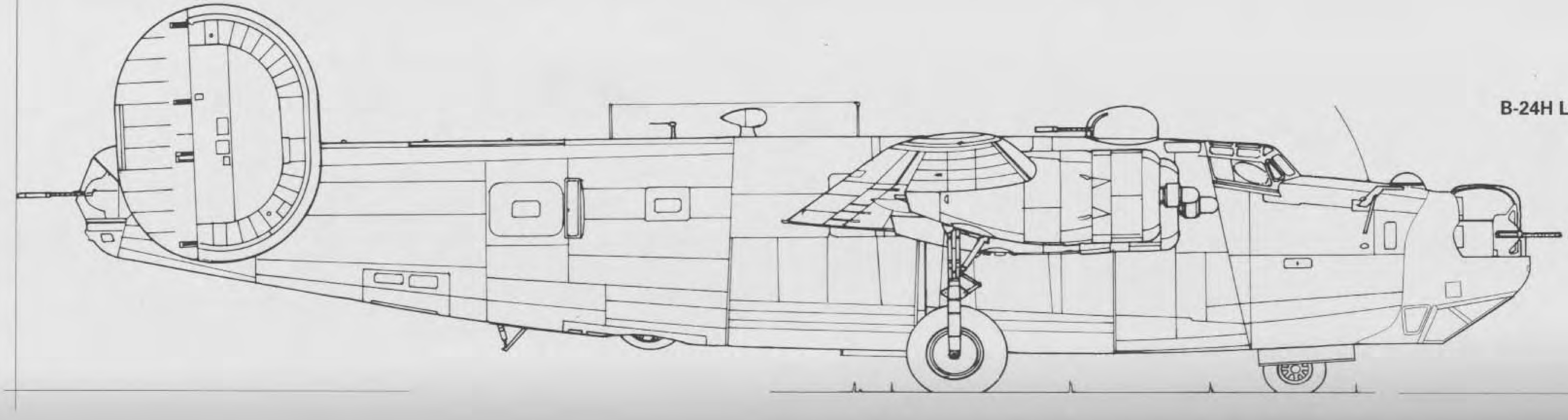
**B-24D Liberator**
**(all drawings on this spread are to 1/96th scale)**

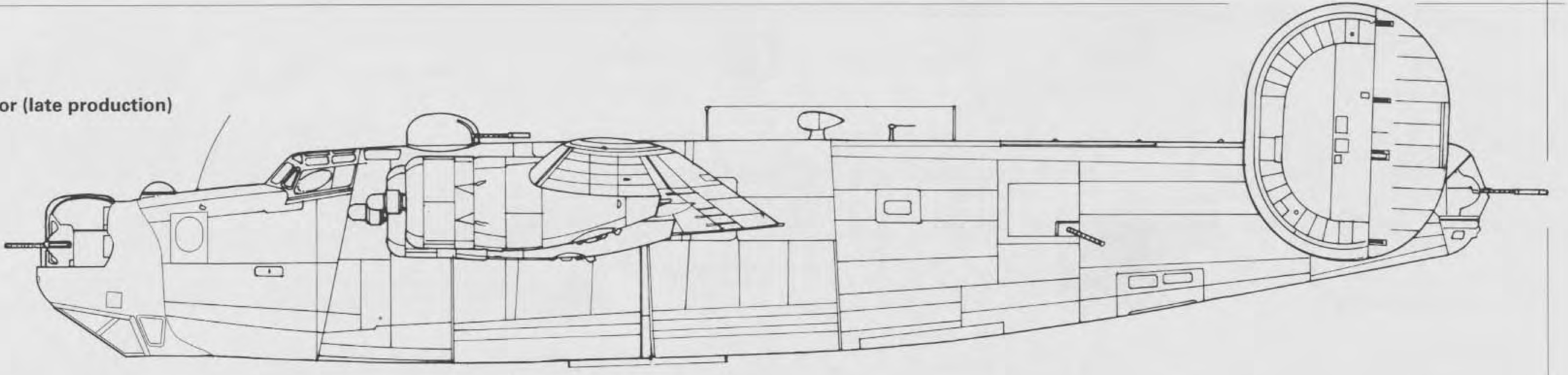


**B-24H Liberator Pathfinder (PFF) *Mickey*, fitted with H2X (AN/APS-15) radar**

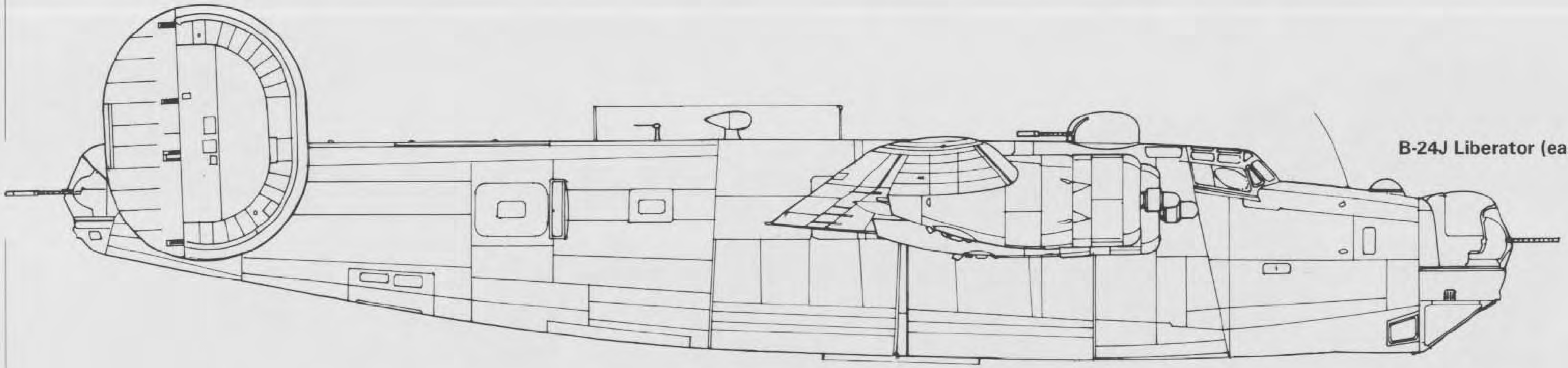


**B-24H Liberator (standard)**

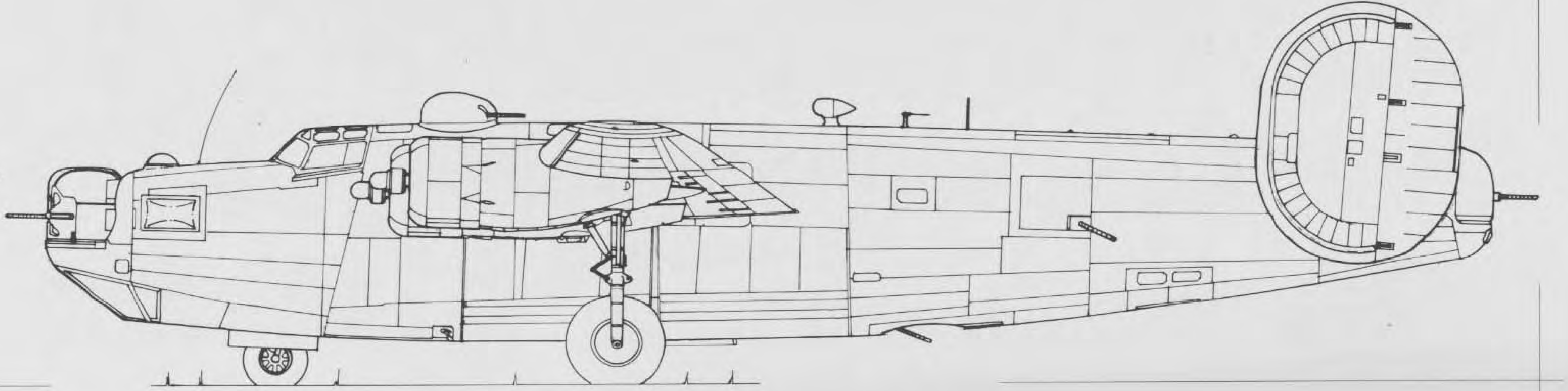




B-24J Liberator (late production)



B-24J Liberator (early production)



B-24M Liberator

# COLOUR PLATES

### 1

**B-24J-10-CO 42-73076 of the 376th BG, San Pancrazio, Italy, late 1943**

This aircraft is finished in the overall Desert Pink scheme common on aircraft in this theatre in 1942-43, although rarely seen on a J-model. A recent arrival in the MTO, the bomber lacks unit identity markings, which were applied at a later date. The B-24 is fitted with an early Convair nose turret and braced pitot heads. Note also the unpainted metal panel immediately behind the nose turret, which almost certainly denotes repair work that had recently been carried out on the bomber.

### 2

**B-24H-CF 41-29279 of the 512th BS/376th BG, San Pancrazio, Italy, early 1944**

Also a part of the 376th BG, this B-24 is painted in the more common olive drab/neutral grey scheme that predominated in the MTO up to mid 1944. The unit emblem (on the nose) consists of a white disc with dark green edging, over which was sprayed a black skull and cross-bones and three propeller blades. The background disc was also apparently seen in pale green with red edging. Note that this aircraft has been modified through the fitment of extra nose windows. This was common practice in the MTO, extra glazing also appearing in other areas, including the fuselage.

### 3

**B-24H-30-FO 42-96360 *WAR WEARY* of the 484th BG, Torretto, Italy, 1944**

Tail markings in the Mediterranean theatre could be colourful as this particular aircraft clearly shows. On natural metal B-24s flown by the 484th BG, the red 'bow' on the fin was outlined in black, but on olive-drab aircraft, it was bordered in white.

### 4

**B-24H-CF 42-64449 *WOLF WAGON* of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, early 1944**

Painted in standard olive drab/neutral grey, this B-24H boasts the triangle in the circle marking worn by all four groups within the 47th BW for much of the war. When first assigned to the group, 450th BG aircraft also featured all-white rudders, but this marking was soon dropped in favour of the wing-wide triangle/circle. Group-specific markings were only reintroduced to the 47th BW in February 1945.

### 5

**B-24H-15-FO 42-52347 *Belle Ringer* flown by 1Lt Erwin Janoviak, 763rd BS/460th BG, Spinazzola, Italy, June 1944**

On the morning of 13 June 1944 this aircraft participated in a raid on the Bavarian capital, Munich. On the return leg to Italy, the flak damaged bomber suffered a loss of oil pressure in its number one engine, which forced its pilot, 1Lt Erwin Janoviak, to feather the propeller on this powerplant. The aircraft was also running low on fuel by the time it left Germany, so the pilot decided to land the Liberator at Dübendorf, in Switzerland, rather than attempt to cross the Swiss Alps on three engines. The Liberator made a routine landing at 1051 hrs, and the crew was duly interned. 42-52347 was the second Fifteenth Air Force Liberator to arrive unannounced in Switzerland on this day, B-24H-15-FO 42-52661 of the 484th BG touching down at Dübendorf just 23 minutes earlier (see profile 20). *Belle Ringer* remained in open storage at Dübendorf until 27 September 1945, when it departed Switzerland for the AAF's Burtonwood storage facility in England. The bomber failed to reach its destination, however, for its crew encountered bad weather over France and crash-landed after running out of fuel whilst trying to locate the airfield at Paris-Villacoublay. This profile artwork shows the aircraft as it appeared when it landed in Switzerland, complete with two nose-arts (the smaller of them depicts a black lion on a white square) and a squat aircraft code letter. Again, this particular bomber has been modified through the fitment of extra nose windows.

### 6

**B-24J-200-CO 44-41199 *YO-YO* of the 741st BS/455th BG, San Giovanni, Italy, late 1944**

Looking resplendant in its natural metal finish, complemented by yellow and black tail markings, this aircraft is shown as it appeared in late 1944. The nose-art features *Bugs Bunny* holding a yo-yo and a bomb.

### 7

**B-24H (sub-type and serial unknown) *MY ACHIN' BACK!!* of the 449th BG, Grottaglie, Italy, early 1945**

Again painted in standard olive drab/neutral grey, this aircraft shows the group-specific tail markings adopted by the 449th BG for the final months of the war in the MTO. The B-24's white fuselage band was a common marking in this theatre.

### 8

**B-24H-15-FO 42-52563 *PISTOL PACKIN' MAMA* of the 464th BG, Pantanella, Italy, 1944**

This aircraft survived almost a year in the frontline prior to being 'retired' following its 43rd mission. It was then converted into a group 'hack' transport, with its turrets removed, although the ex-bomber proudly retained all markings, including nose-art and mission symbols. The combat veteran is shown here as it would have appeared whilst operational as a bomber. The mission symbols are of particular interest, applied in the form of pistols rather than bombs. Again, extra nose glazing has been added. *PISTOL PACKIN' MAMA* returned to the USA in 1945.

## 9

### B-24H-5-FO 42-7752 *Judy Lee* of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, 1944

*Judy Lee* was one of only a handful of 450th BG bombers to have its rudders painted white, the bulk of the group's B-24s featuring only the 47th BW's triangle in a circle marking on their vertical surfaces. Various mission symbols can be seen below the cockpit, including standard bomb markings, a *hakenkreuz* (swastika) and hearts on white squares – the latter may have denoted crewmen killed or wounded in action. A wide variety of individual nose graffiti is also carried.

## 10

### B-24H (sub-type and serial unknown) of the 464th BG, Pantanella, Italy, 1944

Finished in natural metal, this *Mickey* radar-equipped Liberator lead ship featured no nose-art. The aircraft's individual letter 'T' is shown on a white square background, and according to photographic sources, this was later toned down with a light coat of olive drab or grey. This toning down process was particularly prevalent on olive drab-finished aircraft, where the white square stood out far more against the dark fuselage.

## 11

### B-24H-1-FO 42-7697 *THE STORK* of the 726th BS/451st BG, Castelluccio, Italy, summer 1944

This aircraft was among the first production batch of B-24s built by Ford at Willow Run. The aircraft's electrically-driven Emerson nose turret was preferred by frontline units over the standard hydraulically-driven Consolidated version due to the former unit's increased rate of rotation. The H-model was consistently modified during its production run.

## 12

### B-24J-1-DT 41-51284 of the 721st BS/450th BG, Manduria, Italy, spring 1945

This aircraft is an ex-Eighth Air Force Liberator – note the modified Eighth Air Force-style bubble window in the nose. Armour plate has also been added to the fuselage sides immediately below the cockpit for extra crew protection. Of note are the highly colourful yellow and black tail markings, whilst the yellow band that runs around the fuselage is a command stripe.

## 13

### B-24M-5-FO (some sources state B-24J) 44-50616 of the 765th BS/461st BG, Torretto Field, Cerignola, Italy, late 1944

Delivered to the 765th BS straight from the USA, '39' was issued to the unit as an attrition replacement. It later became the last B-24 used by the 765th BS in action. Again, colourful tail markings adorn the bomber, and it should be noted that in addition to these, the bomb doors were also marked with a stripe running lengthwise along their lower side – this cannot be seen here as the doors are closed.

## 14

### B-24G-10-NT 42-78231 of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, late 1944

Shown here in natural metal, this G-series aircraft had originally been delivered to the group in olive drab/neutral grey. Indeed, all G-models from production block 1 through to 10 had been sent to the MTO in camouflage. Most G-series aircraft saw service in the Mediterranean theatre, and none saw action with the Eighth Air Force in the ETO. Note the higher than normal placement of the group symbol on the fin.

## 15

### B-24H-15-DT 41-28832 of the 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, late 1944

Radar-equipped aircraft were known as *Mickey* ships, and this particular B-24 was converted to the role after its nose had been badly flak damaged during a mission. Re-built with metal sheet, the forward fuselage area was duly adorned with the flamboyant paint job seen here. Wearing a standard – but not common – all-over grey (a colour somewhat similar to neutral grey, but slightly more blue) scheme, the aircraft features regulation unit black and yellow tail markings and yellow cowl rings.

## 16

### B-24G-16-NT 42-78394 of the 485th BG, Venosa, Italy, early 1945

Because the 485th BG was one of the least photographed groups in the MTO, the colour and shape of the tail markings for its aircraft have had to be estimated from what little reference material is available. This particular aircraft appears to have had only a partial group marking applied to its fin, or was its rudder a replacement item from another unpainted Liberator?

## 17

### B-24J-1-NT 42-78600 *Kathryn Anne/DOPEY* flown by 1Lt Robert McKee, 98th BG, Marcianise, Italy, April 1945

This Liberator earned the dubious distinction of being the very last B-24 to seek refuge in Switzerland during World War 2, the bomber touching down at Dübendorf with battle damage on 8 April 1945. On this day, the 98th BG had joined other Fifteenth Air Force 'heavies' in a series of raids on Axis targets near the Brenner Pass. 42-78600's navigator, 1Lt Clifford R Bilek, recalled what happened during the mission for authors Hans-Heiri Stapfer and Gino Künzle, who published the following account in their excellent volume, *Strangers in a Strange Land Volume II* (Squadron/Signal Publications Inc, 1992);

'Our approach to the target was lower than briefed – why, I will never know. The mountains at the north end of the Brenner Pass are about 8000 ft high, and we were at about 18,000 ft – German "88s" (88-mm flak guns) were deadly at this altitude. We were flying in the number two position, and the first burst of flak blew the number one aircraft apart and he went down in flames. We automatically took over the bomb run, but not for long, as the second salvo – I believe four shells – caught us and exploded under the number two engine and all along the length of the aircraft from nose to tail. The aeroplane pitched down and to the right, and the pilot had quite a time getting it under control again. The Liberator was a mess, and the decision was made to try to get to France rather than back to our base, which was further away.

'As we crossed Switzerland, we tossed out everything possible to lighten the aircraft, since that old beast was having a hard time staying in the air. Swiss fighters intercepted us, and signalled for us to land, which we did. During the landing, I tied the two parachutes to the waist windows and one of the gunners and I deployed them after touchdown, which helped us considerably to slow the aircraft. The ground was a most welcome sight that day.'

The flak shell that exploded beneath the bomber had knocked out the number three engine and holed the fuselage and wings more than 300 times. 42-78600 carried two examples of nose-art – the female figure shown here, and a characterisation of 'Dopey' from *Snow White* on the port side below the cockpit. It was not unusual for more than one type of artwork to be carried by a bomber in the MTO. Standard mission symbols also adorned the port side, although their position just above the nose wheel door and below the nose-art was non-standard. The extra bulged windows in the lower portion of the nose were fitted to the aircraft's starboard side only.

## 18

### B-24J-195-CO 44-41075 flown by 2Lt Conrad C Alder, 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, March 1945

With the Fifteenth Air Force routinely hitting targets in southern Germany, Austria and northern Italy, a good number of flak damaged 'heavies' sought refuge in the safe haven of neutral Switzerland. One such aircraft was 44-41075, which had sortied on 24 March 1945 as part of a large force from the 459th BG sent to bomb the airfield at Munich-Riem. Strapped into the co-pilot's seat on this mission was Flt Off Robert A Long, who recounted his experiences on this day in *Strangers in a Strange Land Volume II*;

'We sustained flak damage over the target. The number three engine lost oil pressure and the cylinder head temperature was rising. When the number three feathering button was pressed nothing happened. The drag of the windmilling number three propeller prevented a trip over the Alps. Our code call of the day was transmitted – "Sungold A for Able – Firtree – calling Little Joe", which meant a 459th Group A Box aircraft was in trouble, heading towards Switzerland, and were there any fighters available for cover? We crossed Lake Constance and were joined by three Morane fighters. We fired red flares and lowered the landing gear. They guided us to Dübendorf, where we landed. At Dübendorf, a quick look at the number three engine revealed a triangular hole in the number three reduction gear housing.'

Shown here carrying a sharksmouth marking, to which the B-24 was ideally suited, the aircraft features the standard yellow and black checkerboard markings of this group. Note that an additional window has been added above the ball turret and below the 'star-and-bar'. The waist windows have also been modified through the fitment of windows.

## 19

### B-24H-15-FO 42-52485 *BROWN NOSE* flown by 1Lt Samuel B Peskin, 464th BG, Pantanella, Italy, October 1944

Yet another B-24 to end up in Switzerland following a raid on Munich, this particular aircraft came to rest nose down in a drainage ditch after it had landed at high speed at Dübendorf in a badly damaged state on 4 October 1944. Bracketed by anti-aircraft fire over the target area, the Liberator had been holed in excess of 100 times. Again, in an extract taken from *Strangers in a Strange Land Volume II*, the bomber's flight engineer, T/Sgt Joseph Z Krajewski, recounts details of this memorable mission;

'After formation assembly, we headed for Munich. We had to face heavy and accurate flak and were hit by four close bursts. The bomb-bay doors had just been opened when we were hit. I was sitting on the radio operator's stool behind the co-pilot, Lt Frank Hoch, when he was knocked out of his seat. I was hit above my right eyebrow by a piece of flak, and the blood ran down my face. Both hydraulic accumulators burst and caught fire, but they were quickly extinguished. The navigator, 2Lt Earl Thompson, pulled the emergency handle to the front wheel doors so we would be able to jump if necessary. The flak cut a hole in the right side of the ship from the nose to the bomb-bay under the right wing. The second burst, above the ship, knocked the front turret gunner, Sgt Louis E Loftiss, out of the turret, and hit the bombardier, Lt Kyle Abernathy, in the right arm

'At this time three engines cut out and we started to dive. The co-pilot, Frank Hoch, was on the floor unconscious, so I jumped into his seat and helped the pilot, Sam Peskin, fight the controls. The aeroplane dropped in a steep glide from 21,000 ft to 14,000 ft, when two engines restarted and for a split-second pulled 60 inches of manifold pressure (30 inches was normal) until Lt Peskin pulled back on the throttles and readjusted the controls. The number three engine never restarted, since the shell had damaged the engine and wing tank. Gas leaked into the bomb-bay area and was being blown around. After we regained stability on the three engines, the co-pilot regained consciousness and returned to his seat. I had to release the ten 500-lb bombs with a screwdriver, since the bomb toggle had been hit and the intercom was out.

'The radio operator, S/Sgt Ray Menzl, who was manning the right waist gun, had been hit in the left leg. I had to transfer gas from the Tokyo outer tanks to the inner main tanks which were over the front bomb-bay, then I returned to the waist compartment. The tail gunner, Sgt Norman Gibbard, told me that Lt Peskin wanted me up on the flight deck. The waist right side had also been hit by a burst of flak.

'The pilot asked the navigator, Lt Thompson, to chart a course for France since we kept losing altitude and gas, and would not be able to fly over the Alps back to home base. Heading west, we were fired on by anti-aircraft guns near Friedrichshafen but we were not hit. The navigator and bombardier bandaged the head of unconscious nose gunner Louis Loftiss, not knowing that he had been hit in the arm and shoulder as well.

'We started to throw all unnecessary and loose articles out of the bomb-bay, as well as the guns, ammunition, extra clothing, bombsight and anything else we could get our hands on to lighten the load.

'The top turret gunner, Sgt Michael D Mitchell, called down that two aeroplanes were heading towards us, and that the silhouettes were Me 109s. With that, I loaded the Very pistol and started to shoot up a distress signal (flares) hoping this would not blow all of us up, and let the fighters understand that we were disabled.

'When the fighters were alongside, they tipped up their wings to show their markings, which was a white cross on a red background – Swiss. Boy, were we overjoyed. We could not communicate because the radio was out, but Sam gave them a "thumbs up" and we followed them to Dübendorf. We could not land until I lowered the main landing gear manually.

'After circling the field three times, the two pilots in the Me 109s became upset because we did not land. We finally started to align for landing and came in at 170 miles per hour (normal was 125 mph), since we had no control over the flaps and no brakes. There was a drainage ditch at the end of the runway which sheared off the nosewheel. The ship stopped only 15 ft short of the trees at the other side of the drainage ditch.'

## 20

### B-24H-15-FO 42-52661 flown by 2Lt Edward Eibs, 484th BG, Torretto Field, Italy, June 1944

The aircraft is shown in the standard olive drab/neutral grey scheme, with the red and white 'bow' tail marking of this group. 42-52661 landed at Dübendorf on the morning of 13 June 1944 after participating in a raid on Munich. Whilst over northern Italy en route to the target, the B-24 suffered a supercharger failure on its number one engine. The bomber's crew, led by pilot 2Lt Edward Eibs, decided to press on to Bavaria, but further technical maladies befell the aircraft when its bomb-bay doors refused to open over the target area. Possessing insufficient power, or fuel, to return to base with the bombload still aboard, the crew dropped the ordnance through the closed doors, which gave way under the sheer weight of the bombs. The 484th BG was then attacked by a mixed force of Bf 109s and Me 410s, and despite 42-52661 escaping unscathed, two crewmen (the navigator, 2Lt Prodgers, and gunner, Sgt Storer) inexplicably took to their parachutes over Germany. The bomber struggled on until it reached the Swiss border, whereupon 2Lt Eibs realised that his aircraft lacked sufficient fuel to reach friendly territory, so he landed at Dübendorf instead.

## 21

### B-24H-5-FO 42-52106 *SUNSHINE* flown by 2Lt Gifford T Hemphill, 719th BS/449th BG, Grottaglie, Italy, March 1944

Originally assigned to the 716th BS, this aircraft participated in a 449th BG 'maximum effort' mission against the marshalling yard at Bolzano, on the Italian-Austrian border, on 29 March 1944. A veteran of many raids, *SUNSHINE* had already completed five missions with its present crew, led by 2Lt Gifford Hemphill, when it took off for Bolzano. The aircraft had been forced to abort a mission the previous day due to engine failure, but its groundcrew had worked through the night to repair the faulty powerplant in readiness for the 'maximum effort' raid. The bomber was ready by dawn, and at 0821 the B-24 departed Grottaglie. Nose gunner S/Sgt Orel Malcolm Harper recalled what happened during the mission for author Hans-Heiri Stapfer, who published the following account in *Strangers in a Strange Land* (Squadron/Signal Publications Inc, 1988);

'En route to the target we saw a squadron of German Messerschmitt Bf 109s off to our right. We tightened the formation to maximise our mutual firepower and braced ourselves for their attack. We pressed on towards Bolzano but before reaching the target, our aircraft's defective engine once again malfunctioned and had to be feathered. With only three good engines, we began to lose speed and altitude. We were unable to keep up with the tighter formation and knew we would be easy prey for enemy fighters. Fighters waited for a formation to break up, then singled out and brought down the stragglers. We were now a straggler

'Our replacement navigator, Samuel Guttenberg, was flying his first mission with us that day, and he hastily plotted a course to the nearest point of safety – Switzerland. We salvoed our load of five 1000-lb bombs onto the side of a barren mountain, and hoped for the best.

'We scanned the sky for enemy fighters but saw none. We continued to lose altitude, and the lower we flew, the more inhospitable and ominous the mountains below us became. We continued on course toward Switzerland, and just when we thought we would make it, a burst of flak, possibly from Venegono, damaged a second engine, causing the B-24 to rapidly lose altitude.

'There was an excited exchange over the intercom and a brief moment of indecision as to whether to jump or stay with the bomber. The navigator shouted to the pilot that we were about two minutes from Switzerland! We decided to stay with the Liberator while the pilot tried to stretch our rapid descent enough to cross the border into Switzerland, and safety. We sighted an airfield that we thought was across the border and prepared for an emergency landing.'

The badly damaged aircraft successfully completed a hard landing at Venegono, in Italy, just three minutes flying time away from Locarno-Magadino airfield in southern Switzerland. S/Sgt Harper continues;

'As we exited the aircraft we were surrounded by armed and very threatening soldiers. We could not understand their hostility, because we thought we had made it to Switzerland. We soon learned that we were not guests of the neutral Swiss, but prisoners of the Italian Fascists.'

Although suffering from minor battle damage, and two faulty engines, *SUNSHINE* was in full working order, so two replacement powerplants were duly fitted and the bomber flown by two Luftwaffe pilots to Rechlin, in Germany. It was subsequently fitted with a Meddo-Berlin radar system and used by the *Aussenstelle Werneuchen* to infiltrate RAF bomber formations raiding Germany by night. Once in amongst the British bombers, the crew would relay on-the-spot details of the size of the formation, its direction and its altitude back to ground operators via the specialist radar equipment fitted into the B-24. *SUNSHINE* continued to perform this clandestine role until war's end.

## 22

**B-24H-5-FO ??-232?? *BUZZ JOB* of the 485th BG, Venosa, Italy, 1944**

The aircraft is shown in standard olive drab and neutral grey, with natural metal bomb doors that had been fitted 'in the field' by the 485th BG as replacements. The tail markings in yellow were applied directly over the original olive drab finish, as part of the aircraft's serial can be seen within the square – on natural metal aircraft, black was substituted for olive drab on the tail. The spinners were also painted in group yellow.

## 23

**B-24J (sub-type and serial unknown) *HELEN* of the 760th BS/460th BG, Spinazzola, Italy, 1944**

This colourfully-marked Liberator is shown adorned in yellow, blue and black markings. The photograph from which this view was taken appears to show a darker shade applied to the upper portion of the fuselage, with the demarcation line being just above the trailing edge of the wing – rather akin to the darker upper shade applied to US Navy PB4Y Liberators. As the aircraft is natural metal, and the photograph shows the bomber in flight, it is unclear as to whether this was actually an applied shade, or simply a reflective effect from the deep blue of the Mediterranean sky.

## 24

**B-24J-120-CO 44-41355 of the 764th BS/461st BG, Torretto Field, Italy, 1944**

Fitted with an Emerson nose turret and enclosed waist windows, this aircraft is finished in natural metal, with red tail markings. The cowl rings, shown in dark blue here, may however be black, as the photographic reference used depicted them in a very dark shade.

## 25

**B-24H (sub-type and serial unknown) *ALLEY OOP* flown by 1Lt John McManus, 780th BS/465th BG, Pantanella (Foggia), Italy, 1945**

Displaying a very clean natural metal finish, with red cowl rings, that signified the 780th BS, this aircraft was adorned with a brutish character inspired by the *Popeye* comic strip of the time. This figure was seen on several other B-24s during the war, including one christened *The GOON* (B-24D 41-24183) which served with the Fourteenth Air Force in China. *ALLEY OOP's* many mission symbols denote that the bomber had seen much action in the MTO by early 1945.

## 26

**B-24J-20-FO 42-51974 *SISSY LEE* flown by 1Lt Joseph C Clayton, 456th BG, February 1945**

This aircraft was one of six Fifteenth Air Force B-24s that landed in Switzerland following the large raid on the marshalling yards at Augsburg on 27 February 1945. Intercepted by Swiss fighters once in neutral airspace, the bomber landed at Dübendorf with its number one engine shut down. The cowl rings, shown here in red, are again estimated, as reference used appeared to show them in a coloured shade. Note that this aircraft is fitted with RCM (Radio Counter-Measures) blisters beneath its nose.

## 27

**B-24J-15-FO 42-51978 *PATCHES* of the 756th BS/459th BG, Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy, 1944**

The sharksmouthed B-24 *PATCHES* is shown wearing the scheme it carried at war's end. The bomber survived the war and returned to the USA for scrapping.

## 28

**B-24G-16-NT 42-78458 flown by 1Lt Thomas P Faulkner, 455th BG, San Giovanni, Italy, February 1945**

Another of the B-24s to land in Switzerland following the Augsburg raid of 27 February 1945, this aircraft was struck by flak over the target area. The pilot radioed his formation to tell them that his aircraft was 'losing 500 ft per minute' so he was 'going to a neutral country'. Dropping away from the bomber stream with both number two and three engines knocked out (the latter powerplant was locked solid), the B-24 was escorted to the

Swiss border by P-38s. Once over Switzerland, the bomber was intercepted by Morane fighters and guided to Dübendorf, where it landed safely. Re-engined whilst interned by the Swiss, the Liberator was flown back to Burtonwood on 22 September 1945 and scrapped in situ soon afterwards. The aircraft's waist positions have been modified through the fitment of metal sheet and glazing. Note also the bulged nose window and braced pitot head. Compared to their Eighth Air Force cousins, Mediterranean-based B-24s were more heavily modified, especially in respect to the addition of extra windows to improve visibility and internal lighting.

## 29

### B-24D 42-72842 *STRAWBERRY BITCH* of the 376th BG, Benghazi, Libya, late 1943

One of the MTO's most famous B-24s, this aircraft is depicted in profile camouflaged in the desert pink scheme applied to North Africa-based Liberators in 1942-43. *STRAWBERRY BITCH* survived the legendary Ploesti oil refinery raid of August 1943. It wears a command stripe around its fuselage.

## 30

### B-24J-5-CO 42-51554 of the 450th BG, Manduria, Italy, late 1944

This *Mickey* ship served as a Pathfinder with the 450th BG, and it is painted in the standard overall grey-blue scheme. An additional window has been fitted just above the trailing edge of the wing, for the radio operator, whose position was relocated in Pathfinder aircraft. An extra window has also been fitted in the nose. Note the highly polished engine cowl rings and gills. The top of the engine nacelles appears to be painted in a darker shade (possibly brown or olive drab), although of course this could just be due to heavy exhaust staining.

# INDEX

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations

7th Bomb Group 8
Eighth Air Force 32, 33, 35, 43, 49, 59, 75
Ninth Air Force 9, 32, 33
Fifteenth Air Force 35, 39, 40-41, 43, 46, 47, 49, 50, 52, 54, 75, 78, 82, 86
  achievements 37-38, 84-85
  activation 36
  aircraft 40, **48**, 60, 76
  comparison with the Eighth Air Force 59
  establishment 9, 38-39
  order of battle 52, 87
  role 9, **36**, 36-37
31st Fighter Group 53
44th Bomb Group **7**, 32, 34
47th Bomb Wing 40, 47
49th Bomb Wing 52, 60
52nd Fighter Group 60
55th Bomb Wing 52, 67
93rd Bomb Group 32, 33
98th Bomb Group 9, **10**, **25**, 32, 34, 40, **40**, 41, **59**, **68**, **82**, 83, 91-92
304th Bomb Wing 49
343rd Bombardment Squadron 9
344th Bombardment Squadron 9, **59**
376th Bomb Group 9, **10**, **17**, **31**, 32, 33, 40, 41, 45, **46**, **55**, 83, 90, 95
389th Bomb Group 32, 33-34
449th Bomb Group **20**, **27**, 43, 47, 50, 51, 67, **78**, 90, 93-94
450th Bomb Group **18**, **21**, **22**, **23**, **31**, **44**, 47, 49, 50, **63**, 70, **72**, **79**, 90, 91, 95
451st Bomb Group **12**, **22**, **45**, 47, 50, **70**, 91
454th Bomb Group **38**, 49
455th Bomb Group 4, **19**, **30**, 49, 67, 90, 94-95
456th Bomb Group **29**, 54, **81**, 94
459th Bomb Group **7**, **24**, **25**, **30**, **38**, **40**, **41**, **50**, **51**, **52**, **76**, **77**, **79**, **80**, 83, 91, 92, 94
460th Bomb Group **19**, **28**, **66**, 69, **80**, **83**, 90, 94
461st Bomb Group **23**, **28**, **42**, **43**, **46**, **75**, **84**, 91, 94
464th Bomb Group **20**, **21**, **26**, **37**, **57**, **64**, 67, **67**, **71**, **81**, 90, 91, 92-93
465th Bomb Group **29**, **53**, **62**, 67, **84**, 94
484th Bomb Group **18**, **26**, 60, 62, **66**, 90, 93
485th Bomb Group **24**, **27**, **39**, 67, 91, 94
885th Bombardment Squadron 69

airfields 32, 41-42, **66**, **73**
  Italy 39, 44, 44-45
'airman's cross' the **64**
*Alley Oop* **29**, 94
Annecy, raid on 42
anti-aircraft guns, German 35
Anzio 47-49, 50, 57
Arnold, General Henry Harley (1886-1950) **41**, 76
Augsburg, raid on 45

Baker, Lieutenant Colonel Addison 32, 33, 34, 35
Ball, First Lieutenant Bernard **78**
*Belle Ringer* **19**, 90
Benghazi 8, 32
*Betty Anne* **50**
Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress 50, 60
  comparison with B-24 11, **11**, 12, **12**, 13, 16
Bologna, raids on 38, 82
Bolzano, raid on 45, 93-94
*Brass Monkey*, the 54-55
Bratislava, raids on 65
Brereton, Major General Lewis Hyde (1890-1967) 8
  and the Ploesti raid 10, 33
*Brown Nose* **26**, 92-93
Bryson, T/Sgt Robert H 53
Bucharest, raid on 50-51, 53
Budapest, raid on 51
*Buzz Job* **27**, 94

camouflage **9**, **10**, 41
Capitaens, Second Lieutenant Robert 68, 69
Cavit, Second Lieutenant Deane 34
Chapman, Second Lieutenant Walter 62-63, 63, 65
*Chug-A-Lug* **10**
Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO), the 43, 45, 60, 68, 75
Compton, Colonel Keith K 9
Consolidated B-24 Liberator **6**, **9**, 32-33, **44**, **45**, **48**, 52, **55**, **62**, 77
  access 14-15
  B-24N 76, **86**
  ball turrets **39**, **62**, **67**
  bomb-bay 16, **46**, **52**
  comparison with B-17 11, **11**, 12, **12**, 13, 16
  crew 13-14, 14-15, 16, **45**
    dress **8**, 15
  flying 12, 13-14
  heaters 11-12, 15
  noise 15-16
  nose gear 12
  radar 14, **64**
  scale drawings **88-89**
Currier, First Lieutenant Don 44
Curtiss P-40 Warhawk **84**, **85**

D-Day 58, 59
Danube, the 51
*Delayed Action* 55-58
*Dogpatch Express* **52**, **79**
Doolittle, Major General James Harold (1896-1993) 36, **41**, 47

escorts 42, 43, 50, 53-54, 60, 71

*Fertill Myrtle* **70**
France 54, 58, 69
Frank, First Lieutenant Everett 70-74
Friedrichschaffen, raid on 68

Germany 52
  surrender of 83-84
Glantzberg, Colonel Frederick **42**, **43**, **84**, **85**
Greece, raids on 45
*Grey Wolf* **76**
Grottaglie 44, 45, **80**

Halpro (Halverson Provisional detachment) 7, 8
Halverson, Colonel Harry A 7
Hassan, Second Lieutenant John 61, 62, 64-65
Haug, Sergeant Howard 55-59
Hawes, Colonel Philip **43**
*Helen* **28**, 94
*Hell's Belle* **80**
*Hell's Wench* 33, 34
Heubner, Sergeant Walter L 68, 69
*Hottest ??? In Town* **37**

*Iggy* **42**
Innsbruck, raid on 60
Istres, raid on 49
Italy **36**, 39, 44, 47, **51**, 83

Jerstad, Major John 33, 34
Johnson, Colonel Leon 4, 32, 34
*Judy Lee* **21**, 91

Kane, Colonel John 32, 35, 61
*Kathryn Anne* **25**, 91-92
Kelly, First I Lieutenant John 61
Konsynski, Ben 41, 41-42

*Leila Bell* **38**
*Lil' Blon-Dee* **40**
Lokker, Lieutenant Colonel Clarence **53**, **54**
losses 8, 42, 43, 45, 49, 50, 50-51, **53**, 54, **54**, 60, 67, 69, **75**, 85
  Ploesti raids 4, 34, 34-35, 35, 37, 51, 54, 67, 69
Lucas, Major General John Porter (1890-1949) 48

maintenance **40**, **47**
*Malfunction sired by Ford* **42**
Markel, First Lieutenant Bud 11-12
Maudlin, Bill (1921-) 48
McCarty, First Lieutenant Lyle 7, 14-15, 15-16
Mediterranean Theatre, the 7-9, 32
Messerschmitt Bf 109 35, 58
mining operations 51
Mooney, Henry K **76**
Mostar, raid on 47
Mund, Jim 74-75
Munich, raid on 59, 60, 90, 93
Munn, Colonel Marden M **41**
*My Achin' Back* **20**, 90

Neuberg, raids on 77, 78
*Nightmare* **47**
*Norma* **52**
North American P-51 Mustang 53-54

*Ole Repulsive* 74
Olson, Dick 64
*Omaha Ann* **40**
Operation *Anvil* 69
Operation *Argument* 49-50
Operation *Shingle* 47-49

parachutes, braking **75**, 81, **81**
*Patches* **30**, 94
pathfinders **46**, **60**
Pavoncelli, Baron **43**
Phillips, First Lieutenant Guyon 12-13, 82-83
Pinkerton, Second Lieutenant A E 65-67
*Pistol Packin' Mama* **20**, 90
Ploesti, raids on 4, 8, 9-10, 32-35, 35, 37, 51, 53, 54, **56**, 67-68, 69
Prague, raids on 78, 79-82
Pribyla, S/Sgt Harry 49-50
prisoners of war **68**, 70
Pucket, First Lieutenant Donald D 69
Pyle, Ernie 48

Regensburg, raids on 50, 77
rescue and repatriation 38
Ringwald, First Lieutenant Ted 78-82
Romania 51-52, 69-70
Royal Air Force 49, 51

*Satan's Shuttlebus* **40**
*Screamin' Meemie II* 45
Sheetz, Captain Hugh 61, 61-62
Shriver, Dawsey **45**
*Silver Queen* **82**
*Sissy Lee* **29**, 94
*Slip Stream* **38**
Snyder, Sergeant Bill 62, 64
Sofia, raid on 42-43
Spaatz, General Carl Andrew (1891-1974) 76
special operations duties 69
Stevens, First Lieutenant Jack 58-59, **82**
*Stevonovitch II* **57**
Steyr Waekzkagerverk, raid on 50
*Stinky* **46**
*Stork* **22**, 91
strategic bombing 46
*Strawberry Bitch* **31**, 95
*Sunshine* **27**, 93-94
*Suzy Q* 4
*Swamp Rat* **72**
*Swee' Pea* **75**

*Tail Wind* **59**
Tarvisio, raid on 83
temperatures 15
Toulon, raid on 54
Turkey 8
Twining, Major General Nathan Farragut (1897-1982) 36, 47

Udine, raids on 49, 74
US Army Middle East Air Force (USMEAF) 8, 9

Vienna, raids on 67, **77**
Villa Perosa, raid on 42
Vincenza, raid on 45
*Vivacious Lady* 61-65

Wagner, Captain Paul **40**
*War Weary* **18**, 90
Wiener Neustadt, raids on 9, 42-42, 51, 54, 58
Winterhofen, raid on 70-74
*Wolf Wagon* **18**, 90
*Wongo-Wongo* 33

Yedlin, Sergeant Benedict 50
*Yo-Yo* **19**, 90

Zwolfoxing, raid on 69

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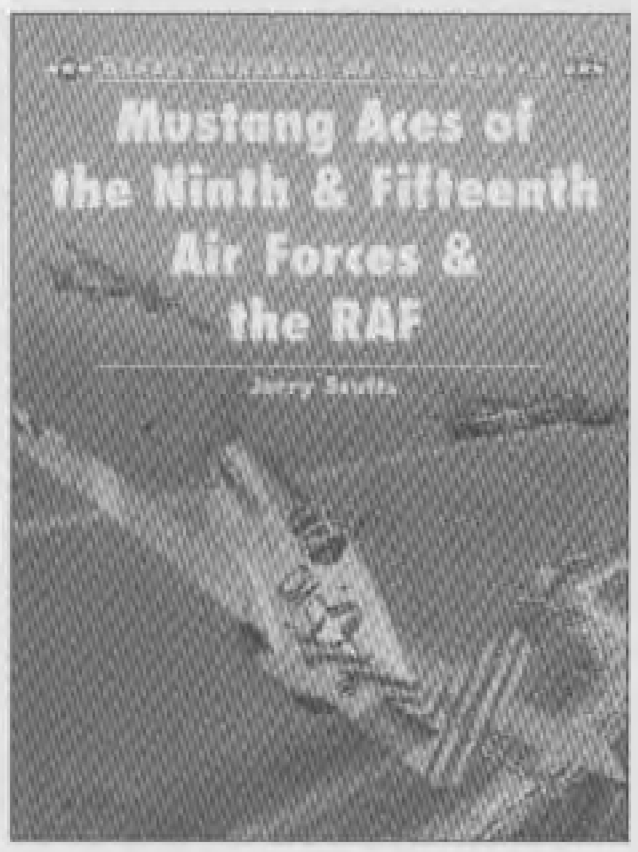

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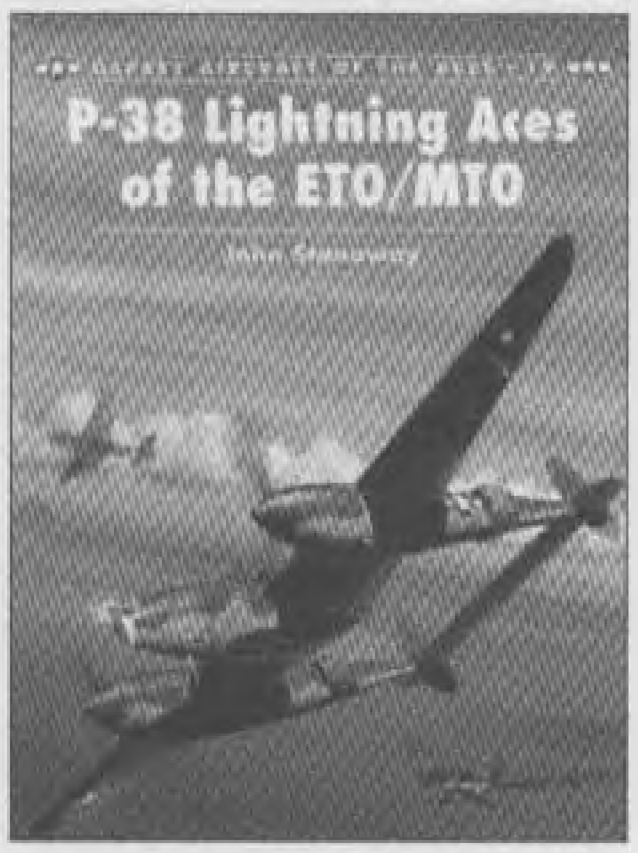

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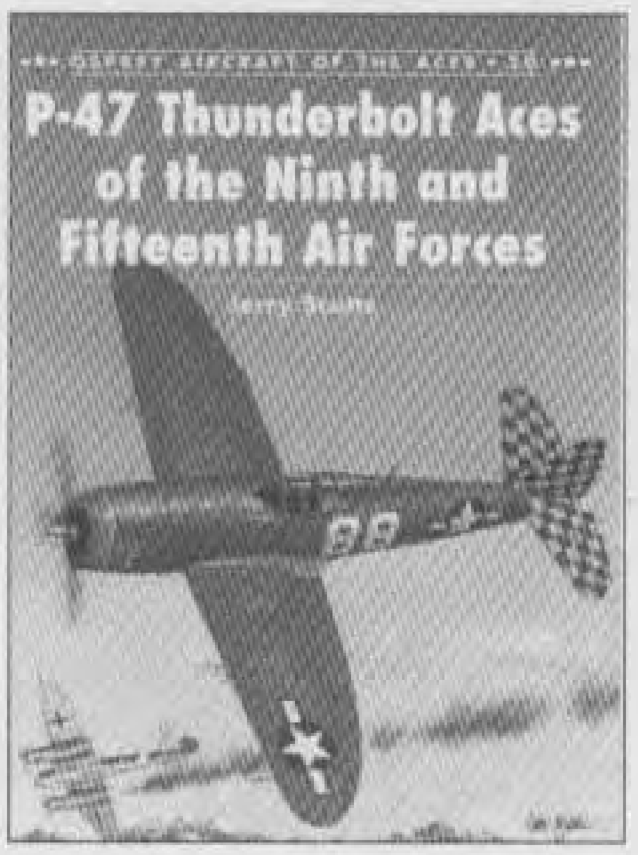

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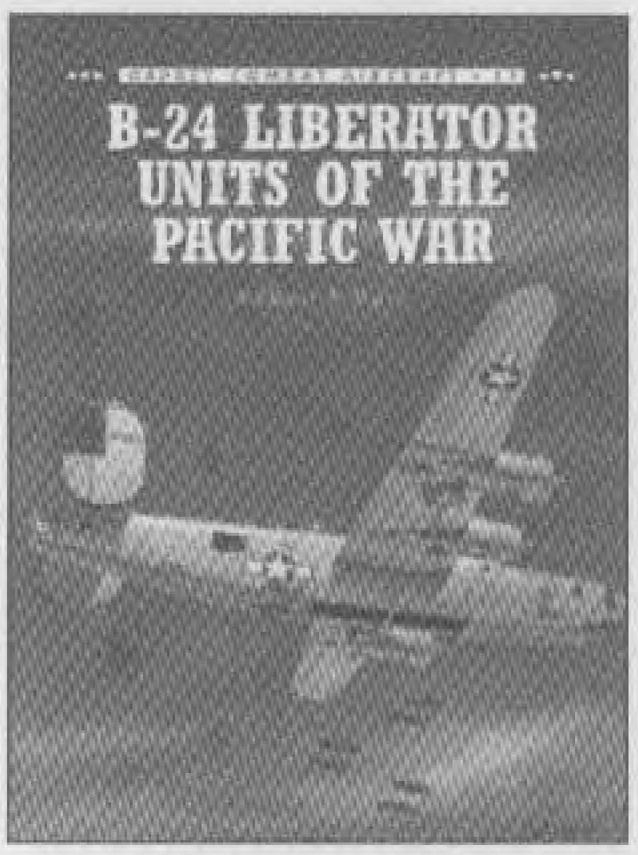

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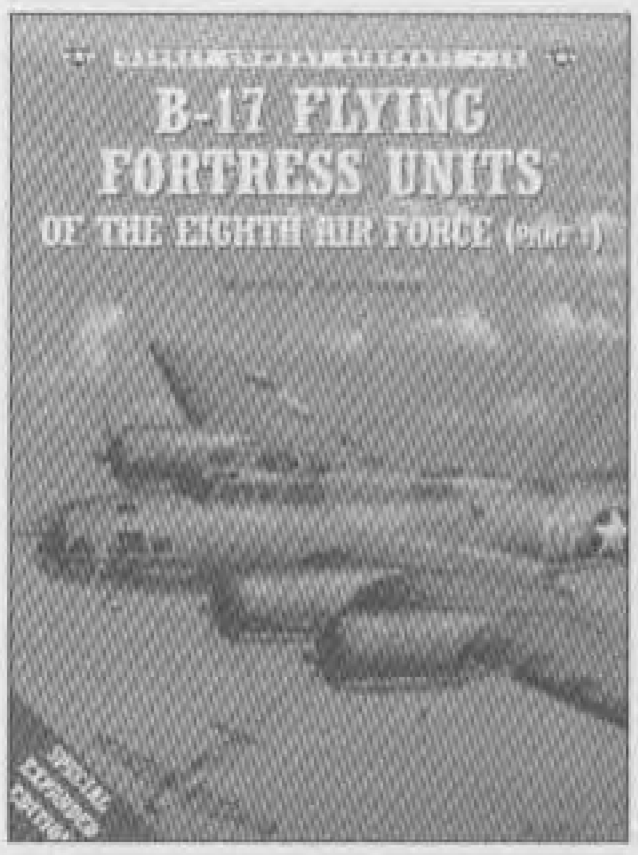

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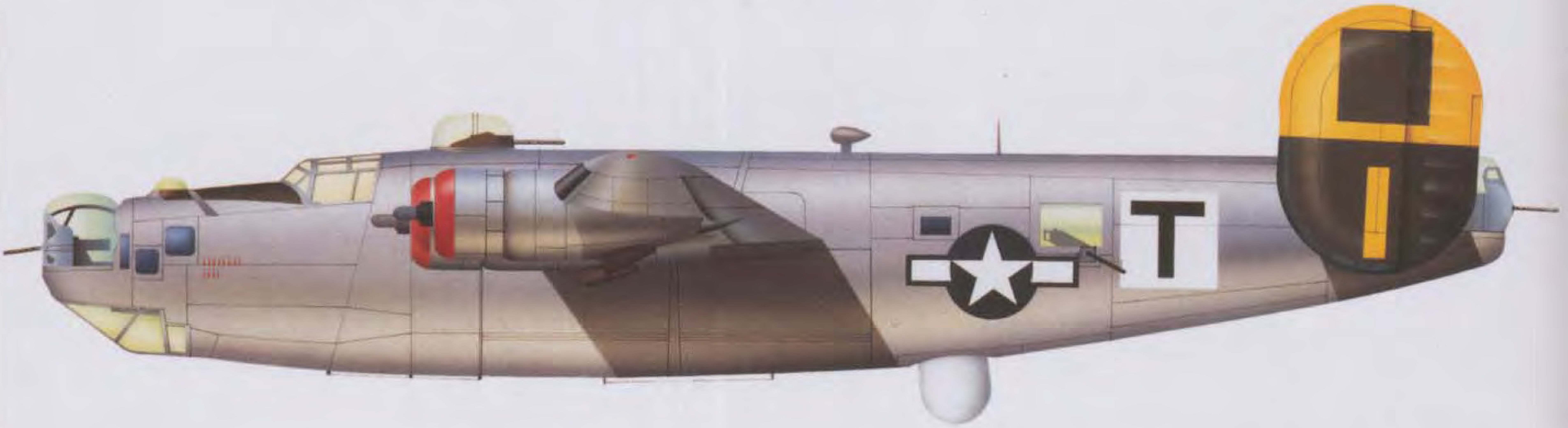

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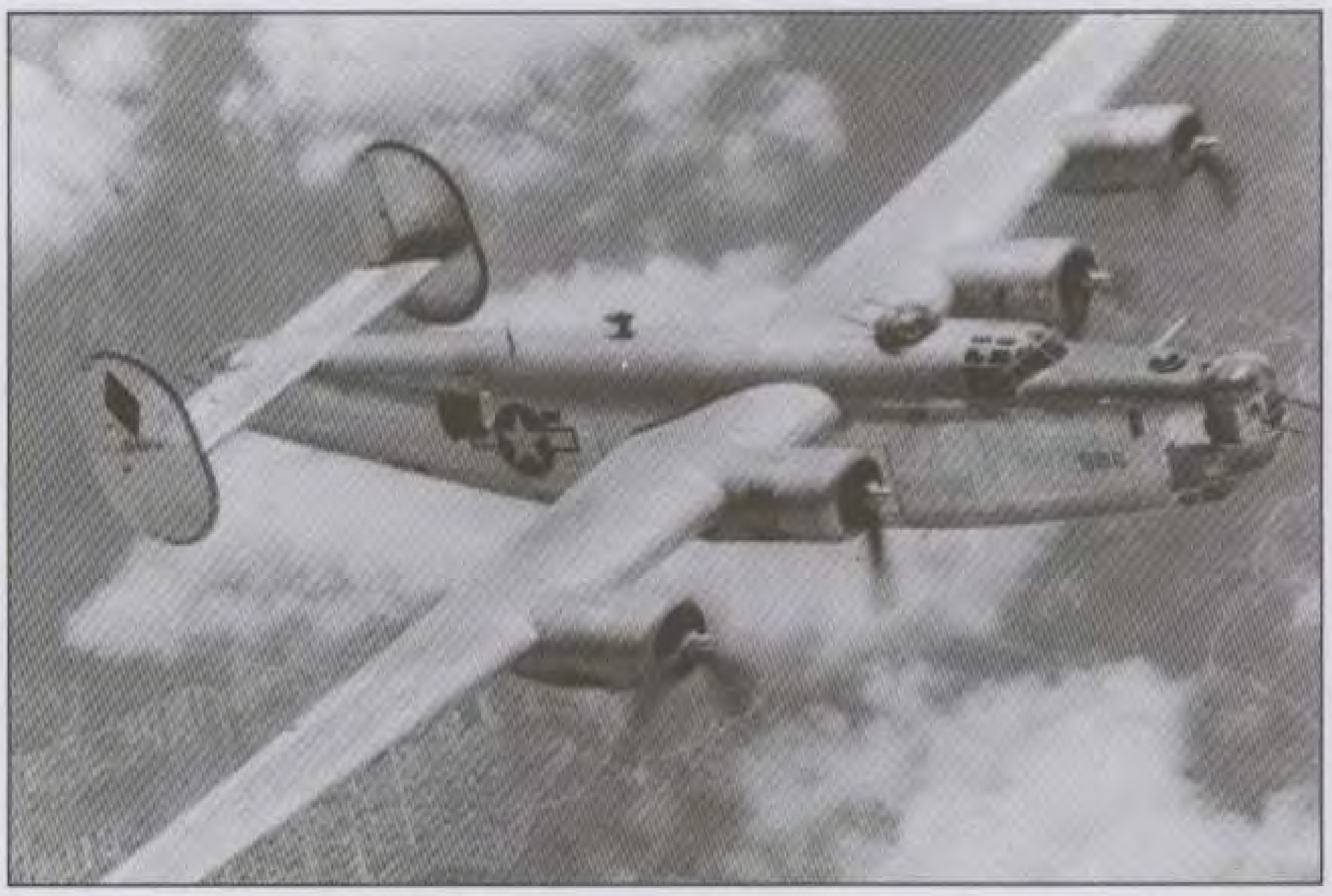

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